



1985

# And then the letting go

Kim Silveira Bowers  
*University of the Pacific*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholarlycommons.pacific.edu/uop\\_etds](https://scholarlycommons.pacific.edu/uop_etds)



Part of the [Fiction Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Bowers, Kim Silveira. (1985). *And then the letting go*. University of the Pacific, Thesis. [https://scholarlycommons.pacific.edu/uop\\_etds/486](https://scholarlycommons.pacific.edu/uop_etds/486)

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in University of the Pacific Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Scholarly Commons. For more information, please contact [mgibney@pacific.edu](mailto:mgibney@pacific.edu).

AND THEN THE LETTING GO

---

A Thesis

Presented to the Graduate Faculty

Department of English

University of the Pacific

---

In partial fulfillment of

The requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

---

by

Kim Silveira Bowers

October 2, 1985

This thesis, written and submitted by

Kim Silveira Bowers

is approved for recommendation to the Committee  
on Graduate Studies, University of the Pacific.

Department Chairman or Dean:

Dr. Charles Clerc

Thesis Committee:

Alan J. Hume

Chairman

Louis N. Leiter

John T. ...

Dated September 25, 1985

And Then The Letting Go

Abstract of Thesis

The novel And Then The Letting Go involves protagonists Samantha Evans' simultaneous discoveries of her husband Don's infidelity, her own unplanned pregnancy, and the pregnancy of her unmarried, best friend Regina. These pivotal events act as emotional catalysts, ejecting Sam out of the passive restraints of her unhappy marriage into a frightening, yet exhilarating, life of active participation.

Within a nine month temporal framework, the novel explores a period of psychological gestation which results in the birth of her new identity. Sam Evans passes from frozen passivity ("The nerves sit ceremonious, like Tombs--") into a chilling confrontation with the "Hour of Lead." Sam Evans' "Letting Go" is not a giving over of control, but rather, a giving into life.

## And Then The Letting Go

When the Evans' kitchen caught fire, Mrs. Robinson thought it was the Second Coming. "I'm ready," she said and sat bolt upright in bed. "I'm ready when You are." She rummaged under the crochet spread for the breath mints, popped one into her mouth and sucked it flat humming two bars of "Onward Christian Soldiers" before she understood the knocking to be of the earthly kind. On the way to the door she stopped by Tweetie's empty cage and tapped the metal bars three times with her thumb nail.

Another neighbor had called the fire department. Barney Taplin lived to the right of the Evans in a gray-stucco-with-cedar facade. All of the houses in the development were painted muted earth tones with contrasting trim.

"I heard ya yellin'," Barney said. "Then I seen ya with a kid under each arm headin' east. First I alerted the authorities, then I broke the window with the nozzle there and hosed it down."

Fire out. Mrs. Robinson battling two inches of water with a long handled mop. Popcorn bobbing in mini whirlpools at her feet. Samantha Evans nodded. She was tired and her breasts ached where the wool sweater rubbed against her nipples.

"Was it oil that caught?" Barney asked.

Nicholas nabbed a half-popped kernel floating by.

"Don't you eat that, Nicky!" Carrie screamed. She was still clutching the sultry blond Barbie who shared her bed.

"Wasn't going to," Nicholas said and rolled the corn in his palm like a marble.

Sam touched each of her children tentatively: first an arm, then a shoulder. "It all happened so fast..."

"He's eating it! God, you make me puke!" Carrie jammed a stiff finger down her throat and expertly produced a gag.

"I was smelling it," Nicholas said and waved the soggy kernel under Barbie's nose.

"Can't you make him stop it, Mother! Can't you do something?"

"Can't figure why the fire truck ain't here yet," Barney said and hiked his pants up with a quarter twist. "I got one a them glow-in-the-dark Emergency Stickems the mortuary give out free? 'Tatches right there on your phone. Public service they say, but I noticed the mortuary got their number right there under the Fire and the Police. Hey now, you don't suppose the hearse's goin' ta show up 'stead a the engine?" He stamped his foot. Water spit up past his shins.

"Watch your upper plate there, Barney," Mrs. Robinson said. "If it drops out into this mess, we'll never find it."

"Jesus, wouldn't that be somethin'," Barney said, cupping his hand under his jaw. "Kitchen burns down and a hearse shows up!"

"Daddy's home." Nicholas splashed through the water to where Donald stood in the doorway.

"Shit, Sam," he said to his wife and touched his hand to

the back of his head. "What did you do?"

"Everybody's all right," Sam said. "We're all fine."

"Except Missy," Nicholas said. "Missy's not."

"You are so weird, Nicky," Carrie snapped. "I can't believe you are my brother."

"Oil fire," Barney said. "It'll happen."

"Missy Fu's in heaven," Nicky said. He squatted until the seat of his pajamas skimmed the surface of the water.

"Popcorn," Sam said. "It all happened so fast."

"Don't you worry, Honey. Surface damage is all. Nothing structural." Mrs. Robinson gave the mop a few swirls.

"Heaven," Nicholas said and rested just the tip of his tongue against the popcorn. "Car squashed her flat, then she went to cat heaven." He put the whole kernel into his mouth and chewed solemnly. He was reaching for another when Carrie tugged him upright by the damp elastic of his shorts.

"I could make coffee?" Sam asked.

"Oh, none for me," Mrs. Robinson shook the broom vigorously in the air. "I stay away from those stimulants, if I can help it."

Barney smiled, opened his mouth, working it slow, formulating a phrase.

"I'd make good and sure my lips were clamped tight around those dentures Barney," Mrs. Robinson said before he could say more than she was ready to hear.

He shut his mouth and rubbed a hand across his knobby vegetable head.

"Jesus, Sam," Donald said. His loafers slurped off his

feet. He walked the distance in his argyles. "You can't plug in a coffee pot standing in two inches of water. You'll electrocute yourself." When they were near enough to touch, Donald turned suddenly and scooped Carrie up in his arms.

"Beddy-bye," he said.

Nicholas, who had squatted back down in the water, looked up surprised. "Ah, do we have to?"

"Yes," Donald said. "Now."

"Barbie is not thrilled about this," Carrie said, and smoothed the doll's apricot chiffon robe with her hand.

"Barbie is afraid of what else might happen if she goes back to sleep." She fingered Barbie's pearl earrings that slipped on stick pins into the tiny holes centered precisely in the middle of the delicate curve of each plastic lobe.

"Thanks for your help," Donald said, looking first at Barney, then at Mrs. Robinson. "Sam'll finish up here." He pointed vaguely to the floor.

At the door Mrs. Robinson turned suddenly and pulled Sam against her large, spongy breasts. She smelled vaguely of incense and peppermint. "Don't worry, Honey," she said.

"I'm a Rosicrucian."

---

Tuesday after work, Toni insisted that Donald keep his eyes open. "Look at me," she whispered. "Look at me and say my name when you come."

Afterwards Toni, with the blond hair that grew casually away from her face, reached across Donald for her glasses.



"I like to see what I'm getting into," she said. "Or was that your line?"

---

While Donald made love to his mistress, his wife sat in a vinyl booth across town eating late lunch with her best friend. Regina Simmons unfolded her napkin and smiled across the table at Sam. The napkin was orange with a green and yellow logo of a bow-tied dish running away with an aproned spoon.

"Look," I told him, "let's get all the biggies out of the way first: I don't hate my mother. I've never had an incestuous relationship, and I have no desire to own a penis." Regina flattened the napkin with the tips of her long ovaled nails. Bright, red nails, evenly filed, with never a chip in the lacquer. In college the nails had been polished a pearly, opaque white. "Virginal white," they used to laugh. At Sam's wedding Regina had worn no polish at all.

"So what did he say?" Sam asked.

"Obviously," Regina rolled her eyes, "he couldn't take the chance that my humor masked an incipient psychosis. He merely rubbed the tip of his nose. A Freudian gesture if I've ever seen one. Then he nodded rather vigorously." Regina sighed and lifted her wine glass. "It's such an indulgence, seeing a shrink, I mean." She spun the stem between her forefinger and thumb. "Jesus, I love being selfish."

Sam laughed. "Did you really say that about the penis?"

"Of course, I'm paying the man, for god's sake. How about you?"

"Actually, I don't much want a penis either."

"Jerk," Regina said. "That's not what I meant."

"No? Well then, how about this. Last night at precisely 10:15, while Donald was at the library researching a novel he isn't writing, I set the kitchen on fire."

---

"All around the kitchen cacadoodle, cacadoo. Well, you put your right foot in, and you take your right foot out..." Barney sang and jabbed one foot in and out of the imaginary circle.

Mrs. Robinson manned the tambourine. When the singing stopped, she beat a frenzied finale against her polyester thigh, and Carrie clapped politely.

"All around the kitchen..." Nicholas began. He hopped from one stiff leg to the other. Carrie walked to the Silver Maple and tugged the sloe-eyed, raven-haired Barbie down from the fork of the tree.

"Let's see what ya got there," Barney said. He had to shout to be heard above Nicholas.

Carrie, skeptical, held Barbie aloft, but kept a firm grip on her waist. "Barbie," she said.

"Well, what's that Bar B. got on there?"

"A halter top. Sequined."

"And you put your whole self in," Nicholas sang and leaped about the lawn with his legs together.

Mrs. Robinson re-tied the slip knot on her paisley shawl and rocked back and forth on the wooden soles of her clogs.

"Where's my mother?" Carrie asked. "Barbie needs to change."

"Lordy, you mean that gal's got more 'n one'a them haltar things?"

"Barbie," Carrie said and lifted her bangs off her forehead, "has an entire wardrobe."

"Barbie," said Nicholas, stopping his frantic dance and flattening his hair straight back against his skull, "sucks!"

Carrie propped Barbie carefully back up into the tree before she took out after him.

"Little bugger can really run, can't he?" Barney said. The children disappeared around the corner of the garage.

"You know now, Mrs. R.," Barney said, "you'd look right spiffy in one of them haltars."

"Isn't that your phone, Barney?"

"Phone?"

Carrie brought Nicholas back, one arm bent behind his back, taking stumble steps towards the tree.

"All right, all right. Barbie doesn't suck. She doesn't."

Carrie released his arm.

"But you do," he said and they were off again.

"I'm sure that's your phone," Mrs. Robinson said and bounced the tambourine smartly against her thigh.

Barney walked home singing, low but not too low, just to the line about Joe Di Maggio. "Coo-coo to you Mrs. Robinson..."

---

"On purpose?" Regina asked. "Did you set the kitchen on fire on purpose?"

Sam shook her head slowly from side to side. "Lack of purpose, maybe." She shrugged. "I wasn't concentrating. It came time to put the popcorn in and..."

"Sammy, what the hell are you talking about?"

"I saw Dr. Marconi yesterday. I'm pregnant."

---

Sometimes in the afternoon Toni and Donald drove to Toni's and drank margaritas: Icy-cold, salt-rimmed margaritas. Donald continued to look surprised when they ended up in bed.

"It's so much easier when you love only the people you're supposed to," he said and reached for his drink. When he remembered it was empty he sighed and dropped his arm back down against the mattress.

Toni pulled the sheet up so it covered her face. Her feet stuck out at the bottom. "I'm thinking of getting an animal, Donald. You know that line of Whitman's: 'They do not lie awake in the dark and weep for their sins'?" She lifted her hand and made a cross in the air. "Bless me Father, for I have sinned." When she laughed, the sheet billowed up in little puffs. "God, you're insufferable, you know that?" She pulled the sheet away from her face. No glasses, but instead of squinting, she opened her eyes wider. "Why is it you never feel remorseful when you've got a hard-on?" She waited for him to smile, then she closed her eyes.

"It's starting again," he said. "Ta-dum, Ta-dum," he

gestured with his thumb to the apartment next door.

"You only just heard it? He's been playing for half an hour."

"It sounds different, like he opened up the drums and stuffed them full of cotton. Ta-dum, Ta-dum."

She shrugged. "It's consistent. Anyway, he has a short attention span."

The drum beat seemed to subside just as the woman in the apartment on the other side began: "I don't care who touched who first. Do you understand? From now on, nobody touches anybody in this house!"

"It's like changing frequencies on the radio..." Donald said.

"How'd the last set of papers go?" Toni asked.

"Well, let's see, Eric Craig wrote on John Steinway. Steinway, for Christ's sakes."

"Close, but no cigar," Toni said kicking at the sheets, grabbing with her toes and tugging down.

Donald cleared his throat. "The thing is, I love my family."

"Have I heard this before? I mean, have I heard this?"

"You have wonderful breasts," he said.

"What?" she laughed.

"Tits, ta-tas, missiles, chobies, bazookas..."

"Jesus, Donald, not again."

"Come here," he whispered, "Come here."

---

"What do you want?" Nicholas yelled over his shoulders to Sam. He was sliding the stairs on his belly. "Bump one, bump two," he said. "Sit still, Nicky. There are thirty-five stairs. Believe me, I know." Every Wednesday while they waited for Carrie to finish ballet lessons, Nicholas counted them all. Cement stairs, covered with forest green carpet in a low pile to hide the wear. Handrails, a contrasting mauve.

The other mothers came in jeans and Adidas, with loose thighs and too many children. They discussed chicken pox and Payless ads. "If that tuna in spring water comes back on sale, I'm going to get a whole case." Some of the younger children played "baby." A fat girl of about five lay on one of the steps with a parka bunched up under her blouse. "It's going to be twins," she said and moaned softly.

Nicholas climbed the stairs behind one of the male dancers. The dancer wore black tights, a white T-shirt, and a gold hoop in his left ear. Nicholas smiled when he made the landing and reached out to pull Sam's face towards his mouth. He was so close she felt his lips tickle her ear. "Did you see that?" he whispered. "A penis and a pierced ear."

When she laughed he looked surprised. He was only six. Maybe he hadn't meant for it to be funny.

"Bump one, bump two..." When Nicholas reached the bottom step, Sam thought she felt something small inside begin to flutter.

---

Donald rushed home from Toni's ready to defend himself

and so was disappointed to discover nobody was home. Then he remembered it was Wednesday and they would be at ballet. He walked into the bedroom and dialed Toni's number. He cradled the phone against his left shoulder and drummed his fingers in a nervous staccato on the edge of the desk. She picked the phone up on the sixth ring.

"What are you wearing?"

"I'm naked, Donald. You got me out of the shower and I'm naked."

"You're not. You made that up. You think that I'm perverted and that your being naked on the phone would appeal to me."

"I'm getting cold, Donald."

"Don't hang up."

"I wasn't going to hang up. Could you just wait until I get something on?"

A muffled thump. In a little while he heard her breathing.

"What are you wearing?"

"A robe. I'm wearing a robe: blue terry cloth with a hood. I'm not wearing the hood."

"You are exactly fourteen years older than Carrie. Did you know that?"

"Is that supposed to make me feel a spiritual connection with your daughter or something? Oh no, wait. I get it. You're calling because you feel guilty. We made love this afternoon and now you're feeling guilty. Am I right?"

"I called because I miss you."

"You called because you're feeling guilty. Okay, take two aspirin, say three Hail Marys, and call me in the morning."

"Don't hang up."

"That was a sigh. In case you didn't recognize it, I want you to know that was a sigh."

"Toni..."

"Do you want to be absolved? Is that it?"

"I think I hear somebody coming. I'm going to have to hang up. I love you."

"I know. That's another sigh, Donald. I love you too."

The car was Mrs. Robinson's. From the window Donald saw her stoop over a juniper bush. Her lips were moving. There was nobody else in the yard.

"Nutty as a pet coon," Donald said.

There was just enough time to rewrite the chapter on the rabid collie and to put the chicken in the oven before Sam and the kids returned.

---

After a greasy chicken dinner, Sam went to sit with Donald in the family room. Donald was unhappy about something. Again, more and more Sam thought of evenings with Donald as times of emotional endurance. The needlepoint she had recently taken up was a conscious diversion. Slowly, methodically, she slid the needle in and out. Damn! The stitch was too loose. The tip on the unicorn's horn seemed blunted and curved like a rhinos. She pulled the loop of yarn



back through the plastic grid and looked at Donald. "Nicholas asked me to marry him again today," she said. "I'm kind of getting off on this Oedipal business, you know?"

"It smells in here," Donald said. "It still smells like smoke."

"I told Nicky in my most maternal voice that he was a wonderful child but that of course I was already married."

The Westminster gave off a hollow, metal gurgle, meshing gears, preparing for the low, melodious chime that marked the hour.

"Barbie is very thirsty! Barbie would like a drink of water!"

"All right, Carrie," Donald yelled. "I'm coming."

Over Donald's shoulder Sam could see the gold framed, double-matted Nedobeck. The cat wasn't actually blue, just the smooth line of its body. The three birds had yellow legs and smugly curved beaks. Under the picture it said "When the cat's away the birds will play." Right after the word "away" was a small asterisk. At the bottom of the picture, beside an even smaller asterisk, were the words "Dreaming of its own importance."

"Nicky looked right at me and said, 'Why did you marry him, anyway?'" Sam spread her fingers out against her ribs, pressing in until the tips went white while Donald ran water into the Bossy-Moo-Cow mug.

"It smells like hell in here," he said, walking past her into Carrie's room.

---

Next afternoon in the busy faculty lounge, Donald took a careful sip of coffee and waited for Toni's seldom predictable response.

"You worry too much," Toni said and took another bite. A dab of catsup oozed out of the bottom of the bun and hit the plate.

"Yeah, I worry." Donald looked at his lasagna. He cut away an edge of burnt noodle with the side of his fork. "Do you mind?"

"Do I have a choice? I mean, do you come with options?"

Amos Adams stopped by their table to ask Donald if he was finished with The Grapes of Wrath film. He called Toni Ms. Anderson and tilted his tray away from them. He seemed embarrassed to have eaten none of his vegetables. When he left he said Toni's name again.

"He likes you," Donald said.

"Everybody likes me. I'm a very likable person."

A wall of glass faced the west quad, so even while eating the faculty viewed and were viewed by their students.

"Don't look now," Toni said, "but little Scottie Allen is gettin' a bit of action."

"Who?"

"Ah ah, no fair turning around. Dana. Dana-Daisy-Chain-Shaw."

"How's the kid do it? Hell, he's not even through puberty yet. He isn't even finished."

Toni crossed her legs. She let her purple sandle work down the length of her foot before curling her toes and

catching it by the strap. "I want to take a train trip," she said. "I want to board an Amtrak car in Stockton and disembark on Tralfamadore. I want to share a time warp with Elvis and Mr. Ed. I want to be spastic in time."

"What's Scott doing now?"

"He's got his hand down the front of her jeans."

"Really?"

"Hell, no, I made the whole thing up. Pass the catsup, Donald."

---

Sometime after midnight Sam reached over and nudged Goofy in the ass. All Donald ever wore to bed was the T-shirt with Disney characters skipping hand and hand across his chest, and his ubiquitous argyles.

"What?!"

"You're snoring. Roll over or something."

Code word: Something. Early in their marriage, Donald awakened Sam in the middle of the night: "Hey, you want to sleep or something?"

"Something," she'd answered. "I want to something."

Donald kicked aside the covers. "Jesus that pizza was salty. Any Pepsi left?"

"Next to the yogurt, in back behind the balogna."

He nodded and walked clumsily down the narrow hall, seeming to, but not really, bounce his shoulders against the slate gray walls. He stopped momentarily at Carrie's bedroom.

Sam lifted a hand and touched her finger tips to her

breasts. She could feel her nipples, which had flattened and spread with the nursing, grow hard and peak against her thumb. Her breasts felt full. She traced the network of veins, then dropped her hands and smoothed her nightgown over the flat stretch of skin above her pelvis.

When Donald returned he closed the bedroom door, quietly, so as not to wake the children. He smelled of cheddar cheese and Pepsi-Cola.

"I want to go to Texas." Sam said. "I want to see the baby."

A bump. Nicholas hitting the wall with a foot or an elbow.

"It's hot as hell this time of year in Texas."

"Jean says they have air conditioning."

He nodded and reached out to touch her.

Sam was certain that even in the dark Donald would notice the changes in her body. He didn't. Asleep before she pulled her nightgown over her hips, he rolled off of her and back into a snore.

---

When he had adjusted to her presence in his garage, Barney started in explaining just what it was that had kept his "light on 'til all hours of the night."

"Goin' ta use copper 'stead a lead," Barney said.

"'Fraid lead 'ill weight the pieces down too much. Want 'em to turn." He took one hand and tilted it back and forth in a slow, easy motion. "Free-like, ya know?"

Mrs. Robinson nodded. "You'll have to make one for Nicky too. You can't just give Carrie a stained glass mobile and leave Nicholas out in the cold."

"Ya got a heart big as all out doors, Mrs. R.," he said and looked pointedly at her breasts. "'Course I didn't forget the little guy. Look." He motioned her past sheets of glass propped against the garage. "Here," he said and pointed up into the maple. At the tip of one silver branch, a webbed spiral of gray and brown.

"I'll help you, Barney. You just get me a ladder. I'll help you."

"Right t'ere," he said and waddled the ladder over from the fence, laying it easy against the tree.

"Hold steady, now." She pulled the back of her full skirt through her legs, looped the end under her belt and started up the rungs.

Barney, holding tight and smiling, watched the skirt undo itself, snapping open like a paisleyed parachute, flouncing free with a cotton woosh.

In the tree, high enough she thought to raise her voice, Mrs. Robinson paused. "Barney," she said. "These are nothing. I've got some at home that say 'Wednesday,' in purple hearts."

"I wasn't lookin'," he said. "I can't see nothin'."

"Hold her steady, Barney." She lifted the nest high above her head and swayed side to side coming backwards down the ladder.

---

Saturday morning Donald got up early and rode fifty miles on his bike. He had taken the frontage road most of the way. No flats. The water bottle that held his juice (frozen, then left to thaw on the ride) was still half-full. Sam hadn't seen his helmet yet. She would laugh. When was it, he wondered, he had begun to think of her jokes as intrusive? He walked into the kitchen wearing the helmet. The plastic ear guards shone like patent leather. There was a blue stripe with a line of silver stars down the middle. Printed in block letters on either side were the words Brancale Sport. Brancale was in black, Sport in green. Donald loosened the chin strap.

"Don't kid yourself it's not terribly becoming," Sam said.

The man on television played the piano. His eyes were closed, his lips parted.

"It's for the bike race," Donald said. He poked a finger experimentally into one of the holes that waffled the side.

"Air circulation," he said.

The man on television closed his eyes and weaved slightly, ever so slightly, to the music.

"What ever happened to Jerry Lee Lewis?" Donald asked.

"Now that sucker could play the piano."

"Is he the one who married his sixteen year old cousin?"

Donald shrugged. "I'm hungry," he said.

Sam pulled a cube of butter from the fridge and dropped it into a metal pan on the stove. When it began to sizzle she lifted the pan and guided it in slow circles across the burner. "Will you shave your body hair?" she asked. "Isn't

that what the athletes did at the Olympics?"

"Those were swimmers, Sam." He leaned back in the chair, his helmet made a dull clunking sound when it hit the wall.

"I got the tickets," Sam said. "Flight 866 out of San Francisco. Friday morning."

"What about..."

"Mrs. Robinson. I already asked. She'll pick the kids up after school. It's fine, Donald. Everything's under control."

"Jesus, Sam. Careful with the butter!"

---

Sam carried the old diaper bag full of paperbacks onto the plane. The canvas bag, with Bottles and Things printed in Rainbow colors on the side, fit nicely under her seat. She closed her eyes and composed a post card to Regina:

Had a pleasant flight. The people next to me played gin, while I was rummy with the glow of anticipated freedom (similiar to alpine glow, though more generalized). The food was either barbequed pork or zucchini.

---

Friday afternoon at four o'clock, Donald washed the margarita blender in the kitchen sink while Toni combed her wet hair with a wide-toothed comb, working carefully through the tangled ends. Water dripped onto a bath towel draped across her shoulders. "You think I come with a fucking warranty," she said.

Donald turned the glasses upside down on the counter to dry and walked to the window wearing the cobalt-blue satin robe that maybe had been a joke. Toni had laughed when she gave it to him and said how it made him look like a boxer. On the street below, three little boys played army in camouflage fatigues and baseball caps. They carried plastic machine guns and huddled behind parked cars.

Toni hung the wet towel on the metal rack and ran the water while she brushed her teeth. When she straightened up, Donald was behind her.

"I'm sorry." He kissed her neck. "I'm a bum."

She turned and bit the end of his nose. "You're a bum."

He watched her pull a dress over her head and reach behind to do up the buttons. A white cotton dress with cap sleeves. She stepped into her sandals. "You said for me to be honest, then I'm honest, and I feel guilty. Oh hell, what's the use. You don't even know what I'm talking about."

"I understand."

"No. You don't."

She tilted her head and used her fingers to fluff her hair dry. "I could have had an affair with Mr. Adams. We could have read Steinway in bed."

"He doesn't like carrots. You couldn't make love to a man who doesn't like carrots."

She took the Joy from her dresser, unscrewed the cap, held her finger over the opening and tilted the bottle upside down. "You haven't said anything about your novel."

He shrugged and sat down on the edge of the bed. "I've



written myself into a corner. The collie has rabies and I don't know anything about rabies. Do they still give long needled shots in the stomach?"

"I told you a gold fish."

"How can a boy have a meaningful relationship with a gold fish?"

"You've got to be more audacious. If you pull off a boy and his gold fish, you've really accomplished something." She dabbed the perfume to the pulse of her wrist.

"I love to watch you do that."

She recapped the bottle and set it on the dresser.

"My mother used to put perfume between her breasts. She wore stiff, cotton bras with wide shoulder straps, and putting perfume between her breasts was the sexiest thing I ever saw her do." She sat down on the bed beside him.

"Maybe I can call you tonight."

"Maybe." She had a way of growing limp and leaning into him.

"I'm not sure."

"Maybe not."

"Toni..."

She pulled away from him, lifted her hand and readjusted her glasses. "You think I don't know how sometimes you check your watch while we're making love?"

---

The transitions from Toni to family were never easy, but with Sam gone Donald had even a worse time of it. He couldn't

just leave the children on a Saturday afternoon with no explanation, could he? Hell, was he even seriously considering such a thing? He walked purposefully away from the phone and into the curtained dining room where earlier he had seen Carrie take a plastic bag of marking pens and crayons.

"Kind of dark in here, don't you think?" Donald reached out and touched Carrie's forehead.

She shrugged, looked up at him, then back to her drawings which were spread out across the kitchen table. One, a rainbowed garden, grew flowers in the shape of hearts.

"Pretty," Donald said.

Nicholas, a blue dishtowel pinned to his shirt like a cape, picked up a pen and popped the cap off.

"Don't," Carrie said. She pulled the pen from his hand.

When the doorbell rang, all three of them went to answer it.

"Are you Donald?" the rabbit asked. "Because if you aren't, I give up. I've been to three houses already."

Nicholas leaned into Donald. Carrie retreated a step and curled a swatch of hair around her finger.

"I'm supposed to sing the message. I mean, you're supposed to open the door and be surprised and then I sing."

Nicholas stepped forward and touched the rabbit tentatively on the knee.

"You got weird neighbors; one of them played along on her tambourine," the rabbit said and shrugged a decidedly un-bunny like gesture. "Anyway, if you want, I could still sing for you."

"That's okay," Donald said.

The rabbit ran a paw the length of one ear. A small wire hoop protruded from the tip. "Message for you in the egg," he said and thrust forward a plastic Easter Basket with a single Leggs-Egg resting on a bed of green excelsior. "Business card's there on the side, if you're interested." He motioned with a felt-palmed paw. "Okey-Dokey." The rabbit bowed and waddled over to a yellow V.W. Just before he opened the door, he lifted his head and smiled. "Now you all be sure and have a hoppy day." Then he drove away with his ears thrust out through the sun roof.

Donald waited until both children fell asleep that night before he called.

"Are you crazy?"

Toni laughed, a low, hearty rumble that reminded him of Carrie. "So how'd you know it was me?"

"Oh come on, 'From one carrot lover to another...' Jesus!"

"You need a little excitement in your life," she laughed.

"Anyway, Sam's in Texas."

"Yes, but the kids aren't."

"Oh, I bet you covered your ass just fine. Come on, tell the truth, you loved the bunny, didn't you?"

---

The thing about Texas was that Sam quite suddenly was alone. Nobody knew her--so there were no illusions to create, no pretensions to uphold. Oh, there was Jean. But Jean was busy "bonding" with the baby. Sam knew how consuming that was.

So, all alone, what to do? It is necessary Sam thought, to occasionally attempt the impossible. To be Sam without apostrophes; not Donald's wife, not Carrie and Nicky's mother. Just Sam. Just Plain Sam. Half way down the avenue it occurred to her that attempting the impossible was no substitute for a chocolate shake. Hunger might have made her walk right by Mr. Magic's Emporium, if it hadn't been for the man (Mr. Magic?) standing on a ladder in the display window. He was tall and very thin and wore cotton sultan pants. After he tacked the enormous kite to the wall, he stepped down off the ladder and smiled at her.

"Come in," he mouthed, motioning her to the door.

The shop was long and narrow. The ceiling, painted a deep and glossy blue, had a silver overlay of glitter. Sam looked up and blinked.

"Like pinholes of light," the man said pointing to the ceiling. "Like bright funnels through space, like miniature stars...."

"How much is the kite?" Sam asked and nodded towards the window.

"Ah," he said. "A woman of taste."

The kites, stored in colored tubes, were stacked against one wall. "Voilà," the man said, bowing dramatically, pulling free a kite and lifting it in a fluid arch above his head.

"And some string," Sam said. "Something strong that won't break."

Sam didn't follow him to the barrel where the purple spools of string were stored, instead she read the sign

stapled above the kites, "To be used prophylactically to prevent tedium, boredom, and (god forbid!) maturity." After Sam paid for the kite, the man released a balloon-driven propeller in celebration. The propeller lifted and spun in spirals through the air.

Sam stayed in Texas two weeks. Not counting the weekend in New Orleans.

---

Two weeks was much longer than Carrie had imagined. Two weeks of feeling vulnerable and responsible.

"I'll be the mommy," Carrie said.

"No. I want to be the mommy."

"Look, airhead, you are a boy and boys can't be mommies."

"What then?" Nicholas asked and licked a gob of peanut butter off the end of the spoon he held in his hand like a popsicle.

"The father, jeez!" Carrie threw her hands up in the air. "Okay now, pretend you're coming home and I'm holding the baby who has the colic."

"What's that?"

"What?"

"The colic."

"Just do it!"

Nicholas kicked a loose Leggo from under the edge of the sofa. "Shit-damnit!" he said. "I had a bad day and I don't need this." He kicked the Leggo clear across the room to where Carrie stood rocking Rub-A-Dub-Dolly, a dimpled baby

doll with very little hair and skin the color of an apricot.

"The baby has colic," Carrie said. She looked intensely at Rubby, running her hand across her forehead.

"I'll call the ambulance," Nicholas said and took another lick of peanut butter.

"You zipper! Not for colic. You put hot water bottles on their stomach for the colic. Jeez!"

---

Tomorrow morning Sam would be home and everything would go back to the way it had been in the beginning. Tonight, it was necessary that Donald see Toni. He found her at the corner corral by the encyclopedias. She kissed him on the mouth.

"Watch it!"

There was nobody to see them. Fiction and check-out were on the ground floor.

"It's your fault, love. You kept me waiting so long; I had so much time to fantasize."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah." Smiling, she motioned to the stacks where they could touch.

"We'll get caught," he whispered and tightened his hands against her back. "I don't know how to jump rope. Did you know that? I don't know how to jump rope and I can't skate either. Sam tried to teach me when we were first married, but it just didn't take. I'm sorry, I don't know why I'm doing this."

He lifted her hand to his mouth. She closed her eyes.

"It's getting bad, isn't it?"

He nodded, her fingers pressed against his lips.

"Can you come home with me?"

"I can't."

"You know what I like best? I like when you hold me."

His arms tightened around her.

"I mean the way you do after--the quiet times." She smiled. "You know, when we tell all the good stuff. All the personally mortifying, horrendously embarrassing things we would never, ever tell anyone else."

He laughed, then leaned forward, whispered in her ear.

"You know all my secrets. There isn't anything else to tell."

"Make some up." She leaned away from him and squared her glasses with thumb and forefinger. "I do," she said and smiled.

---

Somewhere over the Grand Canyon Sam allowed herself to miss the children. By the time she was home (she stopped at the Hopyard exit for burgers and fries) the transition was complete.

"Texas Talahasey," Sam laughed and handed the new doll to Carrie.

"It's Western Barbie," Nicholas said. "Did you get me anything?"

"Take the tissue off," she said.

"Ohh, radical!"

A scorpion trapped in a resinous dome. Texas scorpion.

"It's a paper weight," Sam said.

"Disgusting," Carrie said. She removed one of Barbie's boots and tugged gently at the other.

"Who does the baby look like?" Donald asked.

"Jean. The baby looks like Jean. Blue eyes. Strawberry blond hair, possibly curly."

"Rubby had the colic," Nicholas said and very carefully balanced the scorpion weight on his head. "I called the ambulance."

"Jeez," Carrie said. "Jeez."

Sam waited until Donald was changing for bed that night before unfurling the kite, like a giant flag, across the bed.

"A kite?" Donald asked. "What did it cost?"

"The magician said it was a perscription for happiness."

"What magician?"

"The man in the shop. He wore a satin vest."

"For Nicky? Did you buy the kite for Nicky?"

"I don't think so," Sam said. "I just bought it."

"You mean you bought something and you don't even know why? How much did it cost?"

She shrugged. "I put it on the Visa."

"Shit, Sam! We agreed not to charge anything else."

The kite was beautiful. The white face of an amber eyed cat appliqued on a maroon diamond.

"It was a whim," Sam said and ran her finger over an arch of yellow stitching. "Just a whim."

---



The following afternoon Sam drove to Regina's. One quick drink before she had to leave to pick the kids up. Regina lifted her gin and tonic and clinked it against Sam's glass.

"So I said to him, 'I'm not a decorator, I'm an Interior Designer. Decorators are boffos in loud jewelry who place batik throw pillows on rattan sofas.'" The look she gave Sam was not the one that matched the story. It was the look that said: so tell me already. Whatever it is, we'll get through it together.

"Jeez, Regina," Sam laughed. "Give the poor guy a break."

"Hey, is the sucker still alive?"

The tables in Regina's condo had glass tops, the chairs were plump with adequate support. The sofa they sat on was two shades deeper on the color wheel than the golden rod twill of the carpet.

"So, how was the trip?"

"Hot," Sam said. "Texas was hot and Texas was humid."

"Hey, did I ask for a weather report? Come on, Sammy, this is me. What the hell happened in Texas?"

"Too much, not enough..."

"Shit, don't get metaphysical on me."

Sam leaned back, took another swallow. "I went to a porn show and contemplated a lesbian affair."

"Ho-hum." Regina lifted a hand, covered a yawn. "But did you do anything exciting?"

Sam put her glass down, fluffed her bangs away from her forehead. "While sweating on a wooden bench, a stone's throw

from the Mississippi, I decided to have an abortion."

Regina stood and walked to the hall tree, one hand on a brass hook, her head against the carved oak. "Jesus Sammy, there's no right time for this."

"The first trimester is customary, I believe."

Regina shook her head, rolled it back and forth against the polished wood. "What I have to say..."

"Regina?"

"I'm pregnant, Sam."

Sam walked to Regina and put her arms around her. For a while they stood together without talking. Then Sam put her lips next to Regina's ear and whispered. "It's a fucking coincidence," she said.

They laughed until they were able to cry. Monday morning they went together to the clinic.

---

Miss Estelle James, the woman at the clinic, had perky little raisin tits that barely disturbed the starched blouse of her uniform. "As to the clinical procedures," she said, fingering her plastic i.d. badge, "first we will need a urine sample to confirm the pregnancy, and after that you can decide between individual or group counseling."

"I don't want to be analyzed, just aborted," Regina said and crossed her leg; her right foot made circles in the air with the precision of a spyrograph. "I was reading about something called a menstrual extraction." She uncrossed her legs and leaned forward in her seat. "It's almost as easy as

having a period, right?"

Miss Estelle James took a deep breath, touched the pale expanse of forehead between her widow's peak and penciled brows. "With this method there is a high possibility of an incomplete or missed abortion. We at Planned Parenthood believe that the disadvantages far outweigh the advantages. Menstrual extraction is not a viable option."

Sam nodded and read the decoupage above Miss Estelle James' head. A single letter to single fluffy cumulus cloud. "Today is the first day of the rest of your life," it said.

"Exactly," Regina asked, "What procedures are viable?"

Miss Estelle James took another breath. "During the first trimester, we usually recommend a dilation and evacuation."

"Any pain?" Regina's foot made figure eights.

"Well, you may feel a little--fragile."

"Fragile? What's that? Will I be in any pain?"

"Well, of course, there is a certain amount of...discomfort." Miss Estelle James dismissed the discomfort with a wave of her hand. "But nothing like the pain of childbirth. There is a certain amount of cramping."

Regina glanced over at Sam, but Sam was off somewhere. Sam was off flying a kite, watching the kite scrape tails with a cloud.

"Cramping?" Regina asked.

"Most women choose to go under a local so the actual pain is minimal. During the evacuation there is often a...tugging

sensation while the machine suctions out the material inside the uterus. The whole process takes less than ten minutes."

"Material?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"You said the machine suctions out the material. Don't you mean the baby?"

Sam was flying a kite, holding tight the line, remembering how just a flick of the wrist, an unexpected gust of wind, could send a kite spiraling through space, plummeting to the ground.

Miss James straightened in her chair. "I think you can see the importance of meeting with a counselor before making any decisions."

In the car on the way home, Regina drove through yellow lights and took the corners too close to the curb. The radio, stuck between stations, popped a static hum.

"I just don't think I could do it," Sam said. "Start all over again with the nursing and the diapers, earaches, croup, teething..."

The maples on the corner of Hammond and Swig were beginning to drop their leaves. The leaves curled and skitted across the street, collecting in brown puddles against the curb. Regina rolled down the window and sighed. "You can smell the grapes."

"You can't smell the grapes," Sam said. "It's too late for that. All the grapes have been picked. Maybe you can smell the culls, but you can't smell the grapes."

"Tokays," Regina said and breathed in loudly through her nose. "Yes, Tokays."

---

In Texas Sam had ridden a roller coaster. Someone else's child, a blond colorless boy, rode beside her. On a roller coaster it happens fast. A swift intake of breath, a quick tightening of muscles, then the light, careless floating free.

When the attendant clamped the metal bar down across their laps, the back of his hand grazed against Sam's breast. They began the ascent.

"Is that your car?" the boy, maybe twelve, asked. He pointed somewhere over her left shoulder. "Will it go a hundred and eighty?"

Sam looked at the boy. He smiled. His gums seemed swollen.

"No," she said. "I don't know. It's dark and the cars are so far away."

"A Ferrari," he said, "can go a hundred and eighty." He nodded and ran his tongue across his teeth. He lisped a little, but that could maybe be the braces. Up, Up, Climbing. Before the first peak, he asked again, "Is that your car?" This time he pointed to his right.

"Yes," Sam said. "That's my car." In the stadium the fire works began. "Look," Sam said. "Look!" Pinpricks of light exploded from a firey center and fluttered free like amber bits of confetti.

Just before they slipped over the top, the boy smiled and

took Sam's hand.

---

Donald began to have doubts. Perhaps the rabies idea was a mistake. He re-read the last paragraph. Watched the second hand on the clock. Re-read the paragraph. "God damned kids!" he said when the doorbell rang. He frowned when he opened the door.

"Well now, that's a fine how-do-you-do." It was Mrs. Robinson in a cotton dashiki, lime polyester pants, and checkered gloves. "Thought you might like some autumnal color." She handed Donald a bouquet of fallen leaves and broken branches. "This red one here," she said pointing with a gloved finger, "is liquid amber. That one is silver maple. See how the underside of the leaf is kind of metallic? The smelly one is from the Government tree." She rubbed the tip of her nose and winked. "The you-clipped-us tree."

Donald smiled. "Well now, thank you. Thank you very much."

Mrs. Robinson folded her arms across her chest and nodded. The spider web, caught in the straight hairs of her Mamie Eisenhower bangs, nodded with her. "Sam's not home, huh? Only time a man ever answers the door is when his wife's not home. Least ways, that's how it was with my Raymond."

Donald smiled. This seemed to be all that was expected of him.

"Where's that little one of yours?"

"Out terrorizing the neighborhood," Donald said and

smiled again.

Mrs. Robinson shook her head. "It was like he was just swallowed up by the earth. There one minute, gone the next."

"Nicholas?"

"Raymond. The men who came later, the park ranger and a few of the other campers they'd rounded up, said it was an old abandoned mine."

It took Donald a bit to understand that Mrs. Robinson had not been speaking metaphorically.

She shook her head, then snapped her fingers suddenly.

"Just like that," she said. "There one minute, gone the next."

---

"Hey, it stopped."

"You wanted an encore?" Toni closed her eyes and smiled.

"I'm not easy, but I'm negotiable."

"The drums, Toni. The drums next door have stopped."

She rolled onto her stomach, exposing a cross of pale skin.

"Can you really swim the length of the pool without taking a breath?" He traced the cross with his finger.

"Yes," Toni said. "I really can. Sometimes towards the end I see stars."

"Stars?"

"Only if my eyes are closed. Which depends on how much chlorine is in the pool."

"But stars, Toni. You could pass out. Doesn't it scare

you?"

"Lots of things scare me, Donald."

"The drums. They've started again."

"And I thought it was the sound of our hearts beating in unison." She lifted her right hand and flicked it deliberately in the air.

He bit her shoulder. She rolled to her back laughing and held out her arms. "You're kind of frisky today, aren't you?" he said and hugged her, pinning her arms to her side.

"Frisky? What kind of a word is that? It's like frolic and gambol. I mean, Jesus, Donald. It's something puppies and lambs do, isn't it?"

He loosened his hold on her arms and tickled her. She slid from under him and rolled off the bed. After a while she stopped laughing.

"Donald? If we didn't make love, would you still love me?"

Donald inched his way to the side of the bed. The sunlight coming through the window was bright and made the edges of things more apparent. It was more obvious where one thing ended and another began. "If there were no crisis, would it be necessary to invent one?"

"Would you?"

Donald touched the back of his head. "You aren't kidding, are you?"

Toni's face looked the way Carrie's did when she asked something she wasn't ready to believe.

"Yes. I would love you," he said. "I would love you."



The drums beat a slow, erratic patter that mounted in intensity, then stopped suddenly as though the drummer had been called away.

---

In Texas, after the magician let loose the propeller, he had invited Sam to lunch.

"It's awfully hot," she said and looked again at the sparkling ceiling.

"I'm gay," the magician said and smiled. "If it makes any difference."

"I'm pregnant," Sam said and thrust out a hand. "How do you do?"

"Usually I do a lot slower." He shook her hand and they both laughed.

The magician removed his satin vest, hung it on a porcelain knob, and pulled a paper bag from under the counter. "Voila," he said and offered Sam his arm. She took it. "I have an orange and a banana. We'll have to share the tuna sandwich."

"Can we stop and get Fritos? I've never in my life eaten a tuna sandwich without Fritos."

"No pickles?"

"Just Fritos."

"A woman of taste," he said and smiled. One tooth, the pointy incisor that Donald called his "canine," was gold-filled.

When Sam paused in front of a Stop'n Shop, the magician

shook his head. "It's in the bag," he said. "The Fritos are in the bag."

"Magic?"

The magician winked.

At the park, the only bench under a tree was vacant.

"More magic?" Sam asked. She hated to let go of his arm.

"Nah, it's always empty. It's too hot to eat outside in Texas." He gave Sam half the sandwich, ripped the Fritos open with his teeth and set the bag between them. "A word of advice," he said, "you're going to anyway, so quit trying not to sweat." He smiled. His filling glittered like a shard of mica. Sam laughed. "You're a beautiful woman. And I think I can say that with a certain amount of objectivity."

They shared the fruit. Each ate half, and then they swapped. The magician stopped eating to pull a quarter from behind his ear and hand it to a child passing by. The girl thanked him, touched the coin gently behind her ear, and wandered on.

"The first person I ever told I was gay," said the magician, "was a woman on an airplane flying into Cleveland. There was a big storm and we circled Hopkins for an hour and a half. The woman, who looked a great deal like Katherine Hepburn, had been a nun for fifteen years. Sister Mary Dory S.N.D. was leaving the order, she said, because of 'irreconcilable differences.' I was traveling to Parma, Ohio, to meet my lover, my first lover. I knew the woman was a nun when I told her."

"And?" Sam said. She had gathered up the baggies and

the orange peels and was stuffing them deep into the paper sack.

"Sister Mary Dory, she was still officially a nun, although she told me she already felt 'separated,' looked at me and smiled. 'You do what you have to do,' she said.

A poodle with a satin ribbon clipped to one ear raised his leg against the bench. His nails clicked against the walkway.

"Sometimes," the magician said, and his eyes traveled from Sam's face to where she clutched the paper sack against her stomach. "Sometimes it's not a question of morality. Although, that would simplify things, wouldn't it?"

---

Barbie turned sideways. The cotton balls under her blouse separated. "Twins?" Skipper said and reached out a plastic, fingers-permanantly-flared hand.

Barbie, still beautiful, changed out of her blouse and jeans into a sequined gown. Carrie had trouble with the cotton balls. The gown was waisted.

"Ken," Barbie said, "just loves babies. We plan on having more of course--all girls."

Skipper nodded.

Barbie tossed her head dramatically.

"Oh," Skipper squealed, "You have such bee-you-tee-ful hair."

---

"She's always playing with those goddamned dolls!" Donald said and popped the tab off a can of Pepsi.

"So what?" Sam smoothed the edges of her needlepoint.

"So it isn't real."

"What's real, Donald? Is this real?" Sam pointed to the television set. A short black kid with squirrel cheeks was pouring water into a bed. His climb to the upper bunk was awkward and predictably cute.

Donald glared at Sam. He touched the back of his head.

"Some of the girls in her class are wearing makeup. Would you like for Carrie to wear makeup?"

"You always do that. I'm trying to discuss a concern I have and you turn it into something ludicrous."

Now the black kid was hiding behind the bedroom curtains. The curtains were a deep night shade with crescent moons and scattered stars.

"I just think you're making a big deal out of nothing. What difference does it make if she plays Barbie for a while longer? As a matter of fact, I almost envy her."

"Yeah, and what were you doing at Carrie's age?"

"At ten? I don't know. It was different. We lived in the country. I climbed trees a lot."

"You didn't play with Barbies."

"I didn't have a Barbie, Donald. If I'd had a Barbie, I would have played with her."

The black kid had poured water on his mattress for attention. He was a very precocious child and very certain of the results.

"I still think it may be a case of arrested development," Donald said. He took another swig of Pepsi and turned his full attention to the television.

---

The next afternoon the wind blew so fiercely that the peat rolled in dusty waves across the valley. With every step across the vacant field, Sam's shoes took on dirt. "I'm not sure I even remember how," she said.

Regina laughed. The kite was so large it covered nearly all of her body. She peeked around the edge of it to talk to Sam, "Take those damn heels off. You've got to be able to run."

Sam stepped carefully out of her shoes, then picked a dirt clod up with her toes and kicked the clod far across the field.

"Jesus!" Prehensile toes! What else can you do?"

Sam laughed. She had the string. "Stay there," she said. "Hold the kite above your head." The kite was huge. The wind buffeted the nylon against Regina's body, making a noise between a slap and a pop. "Over your head," Sam said and began to run, feeding the string to the sky.

"It's up," Regina yelled. "That sucker is up!"

Sam only stopped running because the fence wasn't low enough to jump. Regina didn't run. It took a while for her to reach the fence.

"You remembered, after all," Regina said.

Sam nodded. She didn't take her eyes off the kite. The

magician was right. "'Get a big one,' he'd said, 'Big ones never disappear against the sky.'" After a while Sam was brave enough to give her wrist a careful twist. The Amber cat dipped and swooped.

"Sammy..."

"You're going to have the baby." Sam let out just a bit more string. The kite caught a gust and rode it.

"Yes."

"What about Stephen?"

"Not interested."

Sam turned her face towards Regina. "It's over?"

"Yeah." Regina kicked at a clod. "Shit!" she said.

"Shit!"

"I guess you know what you're getting yourself into?"

"No," Regina said. "But that's never stopped me before."

"Want to try?" Sam held out the purple spool of string.

Regina held out both hands. The kite jerked and fought against the transfer.

"Watch it," Sammy said. "Jesus, I swear it's scraping tails with the clouds."

"Sammy, I'd like to go with you to the counseling."

"No."

"Sam..."

"Enjoy the weather, Regina. It will start cooling off in a week."

"You've got an in with the weather bureau? Oh shit, the kite!"

Sam took the spool, drew back a little string.

"I would feel better," Regina said, "if you would let me at least drive you."

"No."

"Jesus, Sam!"

"One more week until Halloween. That's how I know about the weather. In October all the mothers spend hours putting together costumes for their children. Then, just like that, on the night of the thirty first, the weather turns cold and all the costumes are covered by sweaters and jackets."

"You are strange, Sammy. You know that?"

"A mother knows these things." Sam turned the spool in her hands. Bringing in the kite. "How bad can it be? A group of pregnant ladies discussing abortion."

---

A blue Picasso print on the wall. Danish modern chairs with aqua cushions. Six pregnant women, not counting Fern, the counselor, sat expectantly around the teak coffee table. Sam hoped they wouldn't have to introduce themselves, like at a tupperware party: Name, marital status, number of children.

"It is normal to feel ambivalent. Even an unwanted pregnancy is sometimes reason for a certain amount of happiness. Maybe pride is a better word." Fern's wire rim glasses shimmered opaquely against the glare of fluorescent lights. She tucked a strand of hair behind a small, flat ear and smiled a gentle insistence. "Ultimately of course, abortion is an individual choice. But hopefully, our group discussion will clarify a few things and make your decision

easier."

A young girl with acne and the tentative smile of just-removed braces, spoke first. "It was real funny. I mean, first I was scared, you know? Then this friend of mine goes, 'Hey, you've created life.'"

Fran nodded, smiled reassuringly. "Pride in fertility is a very real emotion."

Sam looked down at her hands. New freckles? Age spots?

Another woman snorted through her nose. She looked to be about forty, with chalky skin and small, almost lidless eyes. "I've had six kids in six years. Hell, I've had pride up to here." She raised a pudgy hand and patted the back of it against her chin.

"If we are going to be forced to talk, I'm leaving." This from a pale, anemic who sniffed continuously. "Don't touch me," she said, when Fern appeared to be reaching out.

"No, of course not," Fern said. "You may just listen. Above all we want you to be comfortable."

---

Afterwards Sam needed to walk. If she counted her steps all the way to the park on Sutter, she could not possibly be able to think about the baby. "Three hundred and ninety nine..." Tailed and fish-like with flippered extremities. "Four hundred, four hundred and one..." Coiled around a tiny pulsating heart. "Four hundred and two."

It was early; the park almost empty. Two little girls in cotton jumpsuits. And their mother. Sam sat on a bench under



a Sycamore tree and tried to remember all twenty four of the colors in Nicky's box of crayons. "Burnt sienna, carnation, peach..."

One of the little girls kicked a soccer ball. It rolled and caught up under Sam's bench. The child walked purposefully to the bench and dislodged the ball with a powerful kick. "Mommy," she yelled over her shoulder. "The lady is crying, Mommy."

Later, she told herself, she'd call Regina. "I can't stop thinking of that biology text book," she'd say. "Remember the clear plastic overlays that flipped down to cover the human skeleton? First the muscles, then the organs? Regina," she'd say, "I keep thinking about all those stories. About babies born clutching Dalkon Shields."

The two little girls gathered up their toys. Their mother helped them load everything into a yellow Datsun. When they pulled away from the curb, the little girls waved.

Sam tilted her head and the tears ran into her ears. "Azure," she said. "Periwinkle..."

---

"You know, Donald, I was getting so I could almost handle your overwhelming guilt. I figure it's just some sort of character handicap you learn to live with, right? But this god-damned indecisiveness..."

"Toni..." Donald lifted his hand as if to calm her. She leaned away from him into her chair. The chair, made of molded plastic, curved like one half of an egg shell.

"No, you listen. I'm not asking you to leave your family for Christ's sakes. Just come with me to the seminar."

"I never made you any promises, Toni."

"I don't remember asking for any."

"Why are we fighting?"

"We are fighting because you are forty years old and don't know what the hell it is you want."

"Thirty nine."

"Oh Donald, who gives a shit."

"It isn't just me. It's Sam and the kids, and you."

"Glad to see I made the list."

"I don't want to hurt anyone."

Toni leaned across the table. "You, Donald Evans, are a shit."

---

The next morning after breakfast, Sam laid the leather suitcase open on the bed. Donald packed methodically. Folding and refolding. Slipping his shoes into little plastic bags, twisting them closed. His hair dryer and shaving equipment in their own canvas sacks.

Sam touched the front of her blouse where the buttons had begun to gap. "You simplify everything," she said.

"And you," Donald said, "have the capacity to needlessly complicate." He closed the suitcase, leaned against the lid until he heard the latch snap. "Look, let's not start, okay?" He set the suitcase on the floor near the door. "You've got the number of where I'll be staying?"

Sam nodded.

"Great."

"Donald?"

"What?"

"Did you think it would be like this? When you were twenty, I mean, is this what you thought it would be like?" Her voice was low. Not whispery, but low, and uncertain...

"I don't know." He shrugged. "When you're twenty, you don't think about forty?"

"And when you're forty?"

"You think about twenty." He picked up the suitcase.

"You won't forget about Carrie's play?"

"No," he said. "I won't forget."

At the bedroom door he kissed her on the forehead.

---

After Donald left, Sam decided to clean the house. She was taking the Lysol from under the kitchen sink when the phone rang. She peeled off her rubber gloves and reached across the tile counter to answer it. "Talk softly, Regina. My head is splitting in two."

Nicky had left the scorpion on the counter. With her eyes clinched against the pain, the paper weight looked like a large chunk of resin.

"I realize this may sound insulting, but did you take an aspirin?"

"Two. Neither of them worked."

Sam turned on the radio. One of those digital clock

radios with the minutes filpping down on little metal tabs.

"Do I hear music? Did you just put me on hold?"

"I thought the beat of the music might distract me."

"Poor Sammy. Did Donald leave?"

"Yeah." Sam picked up the paper weight and held the cold surface against her forehead.

"You didn't tell him, did you?"

"No. I didn't tell him."

"Sammy?"

"Yeah."

"Tomorrow, I'm going with you. It isn't up for debate."

Sam laid the paper weight back down on the counter.

"There was a woman at the clinic who had six children in six years."

"Jesus!"

"Jesus ain't got nothin' to do with it." Sam fingered the radio dial. News. "I wouldn't blame you if you hated me."

"Shit, why would I hate you?"

"Anything I say is going to sound morose and self indulgent."

"So what's new."

"Thanks," Sam said.

"Hey, there's no right and there's no wrong. You do what you have to do."

The bathroom was spacious with a large sunken tub and marbled counter. Sam very methodically turned on the hot

water faucet at the sink, then the tub. She took a towel off the oak rack and sat on the edge of the tub. She watched the mirror fog over until nothing was left of her face. She thought of how Carrie and Nicholas liked to monitor their unhappiness by watching themselves cry. When she heard the sobs, it took her a minute to lift the towel and stuff it into her mouth.

---

Toni's squeal gurgled into sexy laughter. "I give up, Donald."

Donald rolled off of her onto his side. Toni lifted her leg and kicked at the water color above the bed. "The Golden Gate Bridge, do you think? Or Yellowstone National Park?"

Donald laughed and lunged for her.

"No you don't," she said and wiggled free of his embrace. "I want to see the mermaids at Ghiradelli. I want a banana split with double fudge sauce."

Later, at the wharf, a thin waiter with short hair and buffed nails removed the empty plate and discreetly slid another stack of french bread onto the table. Donald looked at Toni's chest and smiled.

Toni tossed her head, took a swallow of iced tea and centered the glass carefully on its paper doiley. "I knew it was my mind that attracted you. Am I right?" She picked up a crab leg and stuck her tongue through the gap in the claw.

"And your subtlety," he said. "I found you painfully shy and incredibly subtle."

"Pass me the french bread," she said. "And the butter."  
He clamped his knees around hers under the table.

---

Sam's leg suspended in stirrups, a large sheet draped up over her knees. The doctor wore a green smock. His mouth and nose covered by a floral mask made of some throwaway material, like the lining in disposable diapers. His iron gray hair was probably dyed, permed for sure.

A nurse switched on a bar of overhead lights. All that Sam could see was diffused by a sort of ethereal back lighting. She heard the clink of dialators hitting a metal tray, felt the dull sucking out of her insides. Even without Donald knowing, they would have this in common. This would be there between them forever. Like Carrie and Nicholas, only different.

---

Aaron walked the length of the pool twice. "Goddamned Euclyptus," he said. "Who'd plant Euclyptus next to a swimming pool anyway? Uncle Fat Ass, that's who." He touched his chin. Faint stubble of beard, and after only two days too. Soon be shaving three times a week. He lifted the metal pool sweep off the hook. The long flexible hose uncoiled in a plastic puddle at his feet. Tacked to the fence, a poster listed Pool Safety Rules and First Aids. A smaller sign, italicized, said, We don't swim in your toilet, please don't pee in our pool.

Aaron dragged the hose over to the motor at the side of the pool. He positioned himself so he had a good view of most of the west rooms while he worked. A man and a woman walked towards 3A. She purposefully on too high heels. Click. Click. She waited while he inserted the key, then entered the room without giving him a look. Click. Click. Curtains drawn.

Shit. Who'd they think they were fooling?

Aaron turned the hose, tugged it once. It was on there. He hit the switch. The vacuum sucked air. He walked slowly to the edge of the pool and dipped the plastic nozzle into the water. The dry rasping went moist and gurgly. "God damned Euclyptus," she said. "God damned Uncle Fat Ass."

---

Carrie was concerned. It was important that the costume be just right; important that there be no cause for Eric Handle to point a finger, snicker, and nudge Jimmy Henderson to join in.

"Throw me another one, sweetie," Regina said.

Carrie took a silk leaf from the shoe box on the kitchen table. "Not on the trunk," she said and pointed to the brown leotard. "Up high on the shoulders, and there on the stomach."

Regina stuck a leaf somewhere left of where Carrie's navel would be. She took small, careful stitches following the wine colored vein that ran the length of the leaf. When the door bell rang, Sam motioned for Regina to stay seated.

She touched the buttons on her robe while she walked to the door.

"Samantha honey, I'm going to need that key." Mrs. Robinson wore a pleated smock with puffed sleeves and pale blue top stitching. Her cotton pants sagged at the crotch. "Feeling punk?" she asked and pointed to Sam's robe.

"Oh, just relaxing," Sam said and opened the door for Mrs. Robinson to come in.

Regina looked up, several straight pins clamped between her lips.

"This is my friend, Regina." Sam touched Mrs. Robinson on the muslin puff of one sleeve. "Our neighbor, Mrs. Robinson."

"Glad to know you," Mrs. Robinson leaned forward. She bunched the front of her smock with one hand and reached to shake Regina's with the other.

Regina smiled and removed the straight pins with her free hand. "That's beautiful embroidery work on your collar," she said.

"Oh, this thing." Mrs. Robinson shook a wad of material in her hand. "I was out gardening, wearing a pair of Raymond's old overalls." She smiled. "Functional they are." She looked at Carrie fingering the box of silk leaves. "Well, about eleven o'clock I went into change for the Ladies's Auxiliary Luncheon, and darned if I hadn't locked myself out!" She paused and pulled up on her pants, exposing ankles and shiny shins. "Well, you've got my only extra key and you were out...but I sure did hate to miss the luncheon. Then," she



said and winked, "I remembered about Flo's maternity clothes. Flo's my daughter-in-law," she said to Regina. "Those kids live in this itty bitty place so I've been storing some of their things in my shed out back. Anyhow, I cleaned up the best I could using the garden hose and made it to the luncheon with ten minutes to spare." She nodded again. The pants worked their way down so the edge of the stretch panel showed below the smock. Carrie smiled and ducked her head. Mrs. Robinson nodded and patted where the muslin fell in pleats against her flat stomach.

---

Less than twenty four hours later, Sam took a seat near the front of the auditorium and then turned and watched the children stream in through the double doors. Class after class filed in. No Donald. She checked her watch, settled back into the chair. Still dizzy, and hot. Why was it so damn hot.

On the raised stage the curtains parted and the principal, a heavy set amiable man walked center front. "We'd like to welcome you, children and parents, to Mrs. Nile's production of Mrs. Bunny's Escapade. But before we get started, I'd like to remind the third graders to go directly to lunch following the program."

On stage, a forest of leotarded trees surrounded an aproned bunny. Donald took the seat beside Sam. He reached out and touched her arm. "Which one is she?" he whispered.

"Second maple from the left." She moved her arm off the

arm rest between them.

Afterwards it was to Donald that Carrie ran. One corner of her sweatshirt caught on the upper edge of a leaf and hung suspended like a pale cocoon. "Daddy," she said and threw her arms around Donald's neck. "Was I a good tree, Daddy?"

Sam reached out and plucked at the sweatshirt where it bunched against the leaf.

"Let's see now, were you the poplin near the bunny's den?"

"Dadeee!" Carrie stepped back and stomped her foot.

"If you still want to have pizza, Carrie, you're going to have to go and find your brother." Jesus, it was hot and more humid than usual for this time of the year. Sam thought of vaporizers, shower-steam, Texas choker days.

It was the humidity that got to you. Especially if you were used to dry valley heat. And the trees. The trees in Texas reminded Sam of top-heavy Truffula trees. Tall, spindly pines with their sparse foliage perched ceremoniously on top. Truffula trees. Except with snakes and lizards underneath instead of Brown Barbaloots and Swamee Swans.

Every morning in Texas Sam had run the black-topped perimeter of the Cypress development. Too hot to run. Insane. Head ached with the effort. Feet slapped the pavement in the flat, lazy shuffle. She could not find the rhythm of herself. Sometimes she had the peculiar notion she was running in place.

One morning an armadillo lay smashed on the road to the right of the center line. Sam knew somebody had deliberately

swerved to pick it off, just so. Had it crunched like stepping on a beetle? Or did the tires thump dully over the body, movin' on?

---

At the pizza parlor, in a too narrow booth against the wall, Sam lifted her hair off the back of her neck and looked over Carrie's shoulder to the mahogany panel that hung on the wall to the right of the stage: pieces of animals--the tapering hooped leg of a pony; the limp gray trunk of an elephant--all exploding in a cacaphony of maniacal clapping.

"I wanted pepperoni," Nicky said even before Donald set the salami pizza down on the table.

"Jesus!" Donald said. "It's so damn noisy in here." He glared at Sam.

Jesus ain't got nothing to do with it, Sam thought. And neither do I.

Carrie pulled on a triangle of pizza. Sam broke the band of cheese with her finger.

"Sit down, Carrie. We don't eat standing up." One of the leaves on her leotard detached and fluttered free.

"It's starting," Nicky said and nearly knocked his Pepsi into his lap. "The show is starting!"

The stuffed mechanical creatures performed in front of a glittering curtain of tinsel. Jasper T. Jowels played the banjo and sang a duet with Helen Henny. The Warblettes, chicken critters in slinky sequined gowns, harmonized, fluttering their feathered arms. "Oh Susannah, don't you cry

for me..."

The children ate quickly and bolted. Back to the penny arcade, the room of a thousand ping pong balls. Donald chewed, frowning and wiping his mouth more than was necessary.

"You're going to anyway," Sam said. "So quit trying not to sweat."

"What?" Donald asked. "What?" He motioned to purple, fuzzy Mr. Munch whose yellow brows lifted in three quarter time. "Too noisy. I can't hear." The yellow was more vivid than anything in life.

"I'll have another slice of pizza," Sam said. The panel of parts applauded her decision.

Back home, Sam closed the bedroom door so she wouldn't have to hear. But then, because the imagining was so much worse, she opened it again.

Donald's voice was even and well modulated, as though he were giving a sermon or selling encyclopedias on television. "Ham," he said. "H-A-M, ham. I do not like green eggs and ham."

"Ham," Nicholas said. "H-A-M, ham."

"Write it down, Nicky. Write it down in your best hand writing."

"Printing," Carrie said. "He can't do cursive yet." Still in costume, all but a few of the leaves pulled free of the leotard.

"Did you see the mermaid, Daddy? Did you see the mermaids at Gerry's Deli?"

"Oh God, Nicky! You are so stupid! Gerry's Deli! I

can't believe you are my brother!"

Sam couldn't hear Donald's response, just a well modulated buzz of intervention. Then all was quiet until Nicholas spelled the next word. "Cup, C-U-P. Pup in cup."

Sam lay down on the floor. She bent her knees, slid her feet under the edge of the bookcase and did twenty sit ups. Then, still on her back, she studied the ceiling, remembered how as a kid she had held a mirror to her chest and walked the rooms of her house by following the reflected planes of the ceiling. No furniture, no markers. Just a maze of the familiar turned upside down.

She heard the children fighting over tooth paste. The inevitable squirmish at the laundry hamper, then the silence. In a minute she would rise and complete the ritual--edges of sheets turned down, blankets pulled up under chins--"Nighty night, don't let the bed bugs bite."

Donald closed the door behind him. "Good pizza," he said. She saw penny loafers and argyles.

"Don't unpack, Donald."

"I don't understand." He lifted one foot, then because there was no place to go (she had him up against the wall, didn't she?) he laid it back down beside the other.

"Yes. You do, Donald."

---

Donald did not leave until the next morning. When Sam heard the door shut, she closed her eyes and thought of Texas. Thought of Texas choker days. Thought of sitting on a wooden

bench eating cotton candy. Sleeveless dress damp with perspiration. Hair tucked for comfort behind her ears.

"So what do you say we make love? Then if you like it, I'll tell you my last name." He smiled and Sam noticed the tiny space between his two front teeth.

They met on the merry-go-round. He rode the blue stallion; she stood tentatively beside a pink rhinoceros. He had, she found out later, two Persian cats and an ex-wife who lived in California: "She wore my favorite T-shirt to bed and hated cats, particularly Persians. She referred to them often and always as those smashed-faced felines."

Stupid. God, it was so stupid. Half way to his car (a Mercedes with a sun roof) Sam asked if his place was air conditioned. He laughed and reached out to touch her.

"Not here," she said. "Not here."

Hank was his name. Harry? When they got to his condo he offered her some Blue Nun which he lifted out of the fridge from behind a jar of mayonnaise. "Munchies?" he asked and poured cashews into a melmac cereal bowl. The air conditioner hummed. Texas refrain.

"So what's it like, the San Joaquin Valley?" He kicked off his Guccis, rested both feet on the edge of the oak coffee table.

"Sometimes the sky looks violet when the peat blows. There's a scientific explanation, but I don't know it." She sat cautiously beside him.

"So you like it then?"

"If I tell you I've never thought about it, would that be

enough of an answer?"

The gray and white Persians were being beautified at Feline Fancy. "Yes," he said, "it is a bit pretentious: little pink ribbons and rhinestone collars. But," he said and shrugged, "the cats never have fleas."

Sam laughed at that. Fleas! "Would it be presumptuous to ask to use your shower?"

He showed her the rest of the condo on the way. The study had one of those shag-covered cat poles set near the window. The persians had a nice view of Houston while they clawed.

Hank? Harry? was really very nice. He had a firm jaw and when he turned sideways, something about the shape of his nose touched her. She probably would have enjoyed it more. Except when he got undressed he had on black bikini briefs like the kind John Travolta wore in that terrible movie he made with Lily Tomlin.

---

There had been some discussion about which car to take. Finally Donald took the Fiat and left the bigger car for Sam. None of this was easy. Donald tapped the steering wheel with the palm of his hand and wondered why the traffic light was so slow to change. Had the equipment malfunctioned? The lady applying lipstick in the red Triumph behind him, pursed her lips and blotted them on a purple tissue. She was no help. If the light had malfunctioned, what was the correct procedure? Ease into the intersection? Honk softly? Wave an

arm dramatically from the window?

The lady in the Triumph, finished with her makeup, placed both hands squarely on the wheel just as the light turned green. She gave her horn a short deliberate jab. "Get a move on," she mouthed.

Donald shifted out of neutral and into first so rapidly that the tires caught and squealed against the pavement. He reached out and steadied the cardboard box with his hand.

---

Regina walked carefully between the double row of metal lockers. The lockers at the fitness club were all painted in cool blues and bright purples. "Afterwards, will you come shop with me for fat clothes, Sammy?"

"I can't."

Regina turned sideways in front of the mirror. Even in her loose skirt the high bulge of her stomach was noticeable. She flattened the gathers with her finger tips. "I do believe," she said, "I do believe I'm showing."

Sam brushed her hair into a pony tail and slid on a rubber band. She pulled her Brooks from her duffle bag and began loosening the strings.

"How's it going with Donald, Sammy?"

Sam bent at the waist and slid her foot into the shoe. She centered the tongue and started down at the toes, adjusting the laces to lay flat against her foot without any twists.

Regina, still looking into the mirror, pulled her skirt



off her hips. There was a red mark like a welt where the elastic had cut into her waist. She touched this with her fingers.

"Maybe it's just a phase," Regina said. "You've had hard times before. I mean, hell, none of the good times ever last, so why should this?"

"He's gone," Sam said. She tied a double knot and reached into the duffle bag for the other shoe.

"You mean he's not back from the convention yet?"

"I mean, last night I told him to leave, and now, he's gone." She tugged so tightly on the laces, she had to loosen them and start over.

Already Regina's center of gravity had shifted. She walked towards Sam, weight on her heels, shoulders back, stomach preceding her. "Oh, Sammy," she said and bent to hug her. "The kids?"

"They took it okay, I guess."

---

Donald was not thinking of the children. He was monitoring the muffled sound from within the box--a hesitant irregular scrape. He'd been careful about air holes; even so, he was grateful for the noise. Not that he'd been worried. Still, kittens were such fragile things, for all their sharpness of teeth and claws.

The box bumped against the seat. God, what a persistent little guy. Gal? Stupid not to have asked. The woman who sold him the kitten looked the type to know. Her brown sturdy

shoes worn evenly across thick, ripple soles. A practical woman; the kind of woman who could light her own pilot light and cover the geraniums before the first frost.

He had followed her into the garage to "view the babies." When she bent over and reached into the wicker hamper, he read the poster tacked to the sheet rock above her head: In case of a Nuclear Attack, lean over, put your head between your legs and kiss your ass goodbye.

"Here's a lively one." White fluff. Light, pale, pink-rimmed eyes. The kitten treaded the air with anxious determination.

"Are they all albino?"

"Just this one." She bent as if to return the kitten to the basket.

"No, wait." Donald held out his hands. The kitten shrugged and twisted in an attempt to break free during the transfer.

"Course, if you want that one, I'll have to charge you a little extra."

Donald was reminded of that old joke about the whore with the wooden leg.

"Okay," Donald said. "Okay now." He pressed the kitten to his chest and flipped up the bottom of his sweater to secure it. With the other hand he reached into his back pocket. The kitten fought furiously, but without sound.

"Well, now. I do believe that kitten likes you."

Donald smiled and handed her a five dollar bill.

"You'll get the shots and all, now won't you? These are

my babies and I don't sell to just anybody."

"Yes," Donald said. I'll make sure the kitten is well cared for."

The woman flattened the five dollar bill, then carefully folded it in half. "Just see that you do," she said.

---

Aaron smiled when the Toro blew a grassy divot the size of a tennis ball across the walkway. That'd piss the old fart off. The lawn mower was so noisy, he almost missed the Volvo driving up. Another jerk. Jesus. Aaron slid the lever to off and pushed the Toro along the walkway. It bumped up and over the divet. He smiled.

The jerk was talking to a cardboard box. First he jiggled the box, then he talked, then he jiggled. A god damned loony tune. Aaron wheeled the Toro past the office window where he knew Uncle Fat Ass would be watching. He reached down and fiddled with the gears. If he looked busy, the old fart would go back to his crossword puzzle. Not that there wasn't work to be done. The motel, a fading, baby-shit mustard, needed painting. And the rest: the dim flourescent tube in number four, the broken screen in his own room. But hell, the crossword puzzle had to get done, right?

After Aaron locked the lawn mower up, he grabbed the bamboo rake and started back across the lawn. The jerk carried the box to the door of number six and set it gingerly down. He talked to it some more. When he turned to unlock the door, the lid popped open and something white lept from

the box and streaked past Aaron across the lawn. "It's a goddamned kitten," he said and laughed.

"Can you help me?" Donald yelled and pointed. The kitten ran past the oleander hedge.

"It's okay," Aaron yelled. "He's trapped now. There's a chain link fence around the pool." Aaron dropped his rake and jogged to the fence. They cornered the kitten by the pool sweep; back arched, fur spiked, mouth opened, but no sound.

"What a tiger," Aaron said and laughed.

Donald moved in cautiously. "Now," he said, swooped the kitten up and folded his sweater over the struggling body.

---

Carrie tried very hard to think of nothing at all. She readjusted the ribbon in Barbie's hair. Then, in a hushed, moody voice, Barbie told Skipper about her date with Ken. They'd ridden for two hours on Midnight and Dallas. Barbie of course rode the light colored mare. Later, after the ride, she soaked in her pink bubble bath. This was difficult to manage. Barbie's limbs stuck up awkwardly at odd angles from the tub.

Sam pushed open the bedroom door. "Carrie?"

Carrie looked up startled. "You're supposed to knock," she said and frowned. She had smeared vaseline across her chapped lips and they glistened.

"Sorry. I guess I forgot. Just wondered what you felt like for dinner."

Carrie kicked at Ken with a bare foot. "I wasn't really

playing, you know," she said.

"It's all right if you were."

"Babies play with dolls," she said. "I'm too old. Do you have a box? I want to put them up." She began to scoop everything--dolls, clothes, little plastic hairbrushes and compacts--into the center of the room.

"Not yet," Sam said. "Let's not put them up yet."

Carrie frowned and touched her lips, spreading the vaseline with her little finger.

---

The following afternoon was cool, but without the breezes. Mrs. Robinson put on her work gloves and climbed halfway under the azaleas to get the hose caught up over a brick she hadn't remembered being there. Then after the trouble, the nozzle was so badly mashed as to be useless. Had she run over it with the car?

"Michael row your boat ashore..." Her low, vital voice seemed to resonate some inner intent. She stuffed the useless hose back under the bushes and stood with her hands on her hips. "Where's that Barney," she said. "Where's that man when I need him?" She sang another mournful verse, then quite suddenly gave a little whoop and slapped her hand against her thigh. "The Evans!" she said.

Jingle. Jingle. The rubber boots were black. She hadn't bothered with the metal clasps. Such an inconvenience; besides, she liked the sound they made when she walked. Jingle Jingle. Spry step to the edge of the yard. Sure

enough, the Evan's garden hose was neatly coiled on a metal rack attached to the cedar siding. Mrs. Robinson gathered up her cotton duster and stepped carefully over the low picket fence that divided the yards.

"There was an old lady who swallowed a fly." She bounced her head in time with the song and lifted the hose off the rack. "I don't know why she swallowed the fly." She dropped it over the fence and snapped her heels together. "I guess she'll die."

The idea was to catch the little buggers alive. She had the empty parakeet cage (Tweetie long dead, rest his soul) and if she handled it right, laid it with little door open just over the hole, it would be simple as pie. "Simple Simon met a pie man..." Attaching one end of the hose to the spigot, she fed the other end deep into the gopher hole. "Let her rip!" She turned the water on full blast, lifted one foot and gave it a shake.

Water gurgled up near the walkway. "Oh, Lordy!" she said and rushed to move the cage from where it lay near the drive. "Lordy, Lordy!" The water belched and sputtered from the hole. It spread slowly across the lawn, saturated the packed soil, then flowed in a shimmering sheet over the sidewalk into the gutter.

"It's Mrs. Robinson with Tweetie's cage!" Nicholas said. He sat on the left side of the car and had a better view. Carrie unbuckled her seat belt and slid over beside him. "There!" Nicholas said and pointed.

The car splashed through the water. More water ran from

the little plot of lawn near the house and from the flower beds.

"What on earth?" Sam said. The three of them got out of the car and waded over to Mrs. Robinson who beamed when she saw them and held up Tweetie's cage.

"Got the little bugger," she said.

"A gopher?" Sam asked.

"Oh, look at his radical teeth," Nicholas said and bucked out his own.

"I'm going to drive out to the country. Let the little fellow out in some alfalfa field. Gopher heaven," she said and smiled.

"We'll come with you," Sam said. Which is why they missed seeing Donald who, on his way to Toni's, stopped by the house out of love and guilt and because he needed clean underwear.

---

Donald was careful about holding the flaps shut. The kitten seemed glad to be back in the box. At least it was quiet. Awkward on the stairs, but he managed. Toni opened the door before he rang the bell.

"Donald. I thought you were sick. The switchboard said you called in sick."

Donald smiled and laid the box down on the carpet. "Open it," he said.

"Will I need my glasses?" She knelt down beside the box and began unfolding the cardboard lid. "A kitten! You bought

me a kitten!" She reached into the box, lifted him to her face and pressed his mouth against her ear. "It's such a feeble little buzz," she said. "Do you think he's all right?"

Donald shrugged.

"What does he usually sound like?"

"I don't know," Donald said. "He's only just begun to purr."

Toni settled the kitten in her lap. Donald couldn't hear the purr, but he could see how the effort lifted his stomach in little waves.

Donald woke once in the middle of the night and found himself listening for the kitten as though it were a child.

---

The seals were playing xylophones. One, gray muzzled and obese, bounced colored balls off the tip of his nose. All of them performed admirably.

Sam woke smiling.

Then she heard the low, raspy bark coming from Nicholas' room. She pulled on her flannel robe and walked barefoot down the hall, touching the walls lightly with the tips of her fingers. Nicholas' cough came low and muted from under the covers. "Baby?" she said.

"I don't feel so good." His little face looked pale and frightened.

"Come here, Baby," she said. In the bathroom, shower on full blast, glass door ajar, Sam sat on the edge of the toilet holding Nicholas in her lap. Waiting for the heat and the



humidity.

"You are my sunshine, my only sunshine..."

Nicholas lifted his head to watch Sam's face while she sang. His breath came deep and labored.

"You make me happy when skies are gray..."

Carrie pushed open the door. Her eyes were swollen; she frowned and shut the door.

Sam nodded and rocked Nicholas back and forth on the edge of the toilet. Carrie rested her hand on Nicholas' shoulder. She began singing in a low and sleepy voice. "You'll never know dear, how much I love you. Please don't take my sunshine away."

The next morning everything smelled of Vicks. It had, Sam imagined, seeped up under her nails and saturated her very soul. Nicholas sat propped up with pillows on the couch watching *The Flintstones*. He tried not to laugh. It hurt when he laughed. Sam touched his forehead. Cool. She measured his color through the veil of steam. Better.

Carrie, who had asked three times during the night if Nicky was going to die, was asleep on the floor of her bedroom. Sam covered her with the quilt and gently removed Barbie from her hand. The tap on the front door was so faint, for a minute Sam wasn't sure that maybe she hadn't just imagined it.

When Sam opened the door, Barney looked past her to Nicholas on the couch. "Shh," he said and put his finger up to his lips. "Don't disturb the little 'un. Just wanted ta

make sure everything was alright. Saw the light on last night."

"Oh Fred, you dumb head!" Nicholas said. His laugh ended in croupy wheeze.

Barney shuffled and tongued his plate. So, Sam thought. Mrs. Robinson had told him. It's all right, she thought. Easier this way.

"We're fine, Barney," she said.

"Well," he looked somewhere over her left shoulder.

"If'n ya need help..."

"You'll be the first to know."

He nodded and walked whistling across the yard to Mrs. Robinson's.

Sam closed the door, leaned her head a minute against the smoothness of painted wood. Took a deep breath. Two humidifiers and three vaporizers. Where had they all come from? The machines hummed and wheezed in unison.

"Wet whispers and croupy coughs," Sam said and walked slowly into the kitchen to heat the soup.

That night Jean called from Texas. She called to talk about the rains. Torrential down pours. And oh, the frogs! Green, popeyed tree frogs that climbed the sliding glass doors, lifting their suctioned toes in muted plops against the pane. The baby, she said, stood up in her crib now. Her legs bowed slightly with the weight. Her feet in velvet T. V. booties. Jean held the baby up to the phone and she made vague, mewling sounds into the receiver that might be the

beginning of words. "They always say Da-Da first," Jean said and sighed.

---

Donald ran a finger under the curve of each breast. When Toni shivered, he pulled the quilt high up under their chins.

"Those things," Toni whispered, "have you ever told anyone those things before?"

"What things?" So dark he could only see her in muted profile.

"About the fat lady and about the sparrow."

"No, love. Only you."

"Thank you, Donald."

"My pleasure."

"Donald?"

"Um?"

"I'm worried about the kitten."

"Don't worry about the kitten, Toni."

---

Aaron worried about the kitten. He woke three times to check it. Kitten-sitter, who'd a thunk it! That Evans' guy had said the kitten didn't have a name yet. Shit, you had to name them. Otherwise, how'd they know to come when you called them.

"Cory? You up, Cory?" Aaron leaned over the edge of the bed and stuck his finger into the cardboard box. "Hey you little turd," he whispered. "You awake?"

The kitten bounced his nose against Aaron's finger.

5:25. Aaron could hear his aunt in the bathroom. The careful click of the lock, the low buzz of the overhead fan switched on even before the light.

Every morning she made breakfast for him. Pancakes, eggs, bacon, whatever he wanted. She didn't eat, but she drank two full cups of coffee and smiled often, watching him. It was their time alone together. Sometimes they talked about his mother. "Corrine," she would say, "just instinctively knew when a skillet was ready for the batter." He liked the way she said "Corrine" instead of "My sister," or "your mother."

5:31. "Uncle Fat Ass'd shit in his drawers if he knew about you," Aaron said. He lifted Cory out of the box, laid him on his chest. The kitten worked his way up under his chin, purring and kneaded his paws into Aaron's shoulder.

"Hey, what are ya doin', making bread? Ouch! That hurts."

---

"Is it too hot?" Donald asked. He stepped aside so that the spray of water hit Toni full force against the breasts. She smiled, leaned into the water and reached out for him.

Donald bent his head and lapped a stream of water from her neck. "God, you're so beautiful," he said.

Toni fumbled behind him for the soap. It was in a little plastic holder that had Hotel Carson written in gold letters across the lid. She kept her arms around him and pried open

the lid behind his back. "Let's eat breakfast at the cafe on Butler. They have great BLT's. They use cream cheese instead of mayo and coffee refills are only a quarter."

"I can't eat before the race."

---

"Eat?" Sam asked and pointed to the breakfast dishes: Wheaties limp and floating in a bowl of milk, an orange rind, a heel of toast. One of Nicholas's He-Men was on the floor under the bar stool. Big steroid muscles, microcephallic head.

"Thanks," Regina said. "I already ate. How are the kids?"

Sam shrugged. "They seem all right, but I suppose in ten years they'll be discussing all of this with their shrinks."

Regina reached out but Sam stood suddenly. She opened the cabinet over the sink and lifted down a five-pound coffee tin. "Gotta feed the birds," she said. "Used to be Donald's job."

Sam walked in her slippers and robe across the deck to the maple tree, poured seed into the feeder, hunched her shoulders against the chill. Walking back to the house she saw the doll jammed up under the edge of the deck--naked, toes permanently pointed. She reached between the jasmine and pulled the doll free. Someone had cut all of Barbie's hair off. The familiar made obscene. She took hesitant steps, following a course reflected in a mirrored memory. Fingering

the hair that spiked raggedly from Barbie's perfect plastic skull.

---

In Texas there had been a black and white photo of a girl with short, shaggy hair that might have curled had it been a little longer. Light hair, maybe blond. What was the protocol, Sam had wondered. Excuse me Hank? Harry? Who is this in the silver picture frame beside your bed?

"Do you like this?" the man said and touched her. "I'm sorry if I'm talking too much, but we really don't know each other that well, do we?"

Cat hairs on the pillow. Silver. Satin sheets.

"Go ahead," he said and smiled. "Ask me anything."

"How would you like to go to New Orleans?"

---

Sam laid the doll down in the center of the table.

"Punk Barbie," Nicholas said and picked it up. He danced her on the edge of the table.

"Carrie!" Sam called. But Carrie was already there, in the doorway. She looked at Sam without blinking.

"Can I have her?" Nicholas asked. He lifted the doll over his head and flew her in tight little circles.

"What's it mean, Carrie? I want to know what it means."

Carrie lifted her hand and touched the back of her head.

"I told you," she said. "I'm too old to play with dolls."

Regina touched Sam on the shoulder, first tentatively,

then more firmly.

---

They actually had gone to New Orleans. Sam and Harry at the Hotel Place d'Armes. Right in Jackson Square on St. Ann Street: "Within easy strolling minutes of Bourbon Street jazz, world famous restaurants, Royal Street antiques and the legendary haunts of pirates, planters and river pilots."

"I want to see the Mississippi," Sam said.

"Don't you want to check the room out first?" Harry smiled. Just that.

"No. I want to see the Mississippi." Hot. Breathing an effort. Sweet smelling wisteria dripped from balconies and storefronts. More brick than she had ever seen. Deep gutters and lopsided windows.

"Do you have any children?" he asked and touched his chin as though recently there had been a beard.

"Three," Sam said. "Three children." She did not touch her stomach.

The Mississippi.

M-eye-s-s-eye-s-s-eye-pee-pee-eye. They jumped rope to that as children. White oxfords with black bruise marks from clamp-on skates where the leather met the soles.

"Not-last-night-but-the-night-before-twenty-four-robbers-came-a-knockin'-at-my-door."

"What?" Harry bent so that his face was next to hers, but he didn't touch her. "What's that?"

"It isn't the way Mark Twain said, is all. It's not the

way he said."

Harry rubbed his chin. He had rolled his sleeves up past his elbows. "How about a Mint Julep at Pat O'Brian's?"

"It's too hot to fuck," she said. "It's too damn hot to fuck."

---

"Fuck it, boy. Don't you know what that is. That's Chicago shit. Ain't cow shit or chicken shit. That's Chicago (shee-caw-go) shit from nigger folk. Malorganite. Nigger shit."

"Was it on sale at Pay Less, or something?" Aaron asked.

"You smart mouth me, boy and I'll knock you upside your head. You ain't no blood relative of mine. Now you get a broom and you clean up where you spilled."

Aaron walked past his uncle into the small office.

"Don't you ever open the window in here?" When he reached for the broom Fat Ass grabbed him up high on the arm and pinched.

"Not that broom. You think I want Chicago nigger shit on that broom, Boy? Go get the one out back."

After he cleaned up (Fat Ass made him drag the hose around and wash the walkway while he stood overseeing from his stinking office) Aaron went inside and showered before he took the bag from his top drawer.

Earlier, when he'd asked his Aunt for the money, she'd taken the five dollars out of the empty tin of soda and handed it to him without even asking.

Aaron slipped the reflector collar over Cory's head and



worked the loose end through the metal clasp. Cory shook his head once and started purring.

---

Sam pinched Nicholas's nostrils together. That stopped most of the bleeding. "You're all right. Just tilt your head back and tell me what happened."

He hiccuped. Touched his fingers to his nose.

Damnit, Nicholas, tell me what happened."

"Joshua said I couldn't climb the maple tree. He said I was a baby cakes and couldn't climb the maple."

Sam kept one hand pinching at his nostrils. The other she ran across his forehead.

"His Daddy's taking him to Oregon next summer. His Daddy's going to teach him how to fish."

All the while he cried, she stood pinching his nose and rubbing his forehead.

---

Toni got up from the curb and found a bench beside a locust tree some distance from the track. She closed her eyes and listened to the metal whirr of gears and the muted sound of rubber tire-turns against the pavement.

On about the third lap the leader (stout, hairy legs, and orange helmet) slipped sideways out of control and hit the curb. He checked his bike first, then someone handed him a rag and he mopped at the blood on his knees.

Donald didn't win the race, but he got a red T-shirt with

the name of the sponsor silk screened in blue across the back. On the way home they stopped at Vic's for ice cream. Donald had two scoops and Toni said there was no reason why they couldn't live together.

"Is this a proposal?" Donald asked. His helmet, which he refused to leave in the car because one of the locks was broken ("Who Donald, who would want the thing?") was on the table between them. Toni reached out and drummed it with her fingers.

"Of sorts," she said. "Of sorts."

She smiled. He did not.

"Come live with me and be my love..?"

"Forever and ever, or whichever comes first." Having finished her ice cream, she laid the empty cone between them.

---

At the emergency room Carrie was allowed to stand with Sam in the curtained cubicle while a nurse using a metal clamp like a long pair of tweezers, stuffed gauze up Nicholas's nose.

"A tree, you say?" she laughed.

Nicholas nodded. He had stopped crying as soon as they walked through the big double Emergency Room Doors.

"So how's the tree look?" she laughed again.

Nicholas smiled, distracted by the number of freckles on her arms. An amazing number of freckles, packed so closely together that from a distance she appeared to be tanned.

"Well, Nick, we'll have you fixed up here in no time at all."

On the way to the hospital, Nicholas had worried about blood getting on the plastic seats. Carrie, who had vaselined her lips (and maybe crayoned?), leaned over the seat and kissed him on the cheek. "You are my sunshine, my only sunshine..." She sang all the way to the hospital in a slow, even voice. Nicholas whimpered some, but low, so as not to interfere with the words.

"Well, sweetie," the nurse said, after she had removed the saturated gauze and they had waited patiently to make certain the bleeding had subsided, "looks like you're cured." She kissed him on the forehead.

"I like freckles," he said.

On the way home they stopped at Pardinis. Nicholas bought another He-Man. The body was striped yellow and black. Plastic wings sprouted from the shoulders. Carrie bought a tiny tablet and a thick marking pen with pink poodles dancing nose to nose around the shaft.

---

Donald pulled into the driveway and was surprised when the children didn't run out to greet him. He killed the engine and watched Mrs. Robinson, in a silk duster, drop the garden hose and step over the picket fence smiling. When she was close enough for him to hear, she lifted one booted foot and shook it in the air. She laughed when the buckles jungled.

"Hello," Donald said, holding his helmet against his chest.

"Oh," she said and lifted her dirty hands in front of her face. "I've got muddy paws today. But in the spring we'll have daffodils and jonquils. You like yellow? They have daffodils now that blossom green. Course by the time St. Patrick's day is here, they've come and gone."

"Yellow is nice." Donald looked towards the window. Shouldn't the children be running out to greet him? Perhaps he should have honked the horn? He felt his shirt pockets: two sticks of gum. Oh well, nothing would be enough anyway.

"Hyacinths are nice, and tulips too." Mrs. Robinson lifted first one booted foot, then the other.

When Sam drove into the driveway she waved and smiled heartily so Donald wouldn't be frightened when he saw the blood. "It's all right, Donald," she said even before he had gotten out of the car. "It's all right."

Donald helped Nicholas into some clean clothes. "I want to tell Josh," he said. "I want to tell Josh about the hospital." Flash. Out the door.

"I'll wait for you," Donald called after him. Then he walked to the sink where Sam held the T-shirt, still splotchy with blood.

"It's ruined you know," Sam said. "He'll want to keep it and it's ruined."

Donald laughed. "A badge of courage?"

"Something like that." She emptied the sink. Filled it with clean water. Slowly, methodically, Sam worked the water

through the T-shirt.

---

At night the Mississippi had looked inky and pure. Still hot, but without the sun you noticed the breezes more. At dinner (Sam wanted anything Creole--spicy, so it would burn going down), Harry talked. His smiles punctuated every sentence. Sam liked the way he leaned into the table, head cocked, waiting for her response.

"Will I see you again after this?"

"I'm married."

"So?"

"I live in California."

"That," he said, "could be a problem."

Sam smiled. "Do you fly kites?"

"You mean when I was a kid?"

"I mean, if I bought a kite for you, would you think me strange?"

"I think you're strange. But kites have nothing to do with it."

Sam laughed. "Tell me something about yourself you've never told anyone else."

He leaned across the table and took her hand. "It might be easier to prick our fingers and mingle blood bubbles."

"Sure it would," Sam said. "Sure it would."

Later that night Sam took a bath alone. "I need to stretch out," she said and left Harry sitting on the edge of the bed watching Johnny Carson. She used so much lather she

couldn't see her flesh through the suds.

In the room adjoining the bath, Sam heard a woman moan. "More?!" a man asked. He seemed incredulous. "Yes," she said, "Oh, yes." the man laughed. "Well, baby, it's your ass." The woman moaned again.

In bed, Sam bit Harry on the neck. Then the arm. She felt the muscle between her teeth, bit harder.

"Jesus, woman! Jesus!" He stuck his finger into the corner of her mouth--same way she used to pop the babies off her empty breasts. "Break the suction," the nurse had told her. "Break the suction."

---

Aaron didn't know what to do about the collar. That Evans' guy would probably think it was stupid if he left it on. But if he didn't, and Cory got out at night... Oh hell, it wasn't even his cat, was it? He picked Cory up and tickled him under the chin.

At breakfast Aaron told his aunt all about Cory. She nodded and took another sip of coffee. Aaron figured the kitten was no news to her.

"You know," she said and retied the purple sash on her robe. "I've been thinking about getting a kitten, a nice fuzzy one. What'ya call those fuzzy ones?"

"Persians," Aaron said. He cut another piece of sausage, chewed a while. "They're pretty all right. But they got their senses bred out of them."

She nodded. "Well, I expect just an old alley cat would

satisfy me."

"This Cory," Aaron said, "is pure, pure white."

When Donald and Toni drove up Aaron was scooping leaves from the pool. If he heard the car, he didn't look up.

"You think ten's enough?" Donald asked. He leaned sideways and slid his wallet from his back pocket. "All I've got is a twenty. You have anything smaller to get your kitten out of hock?"

Toni laughed. "I think I have a ten." She reached into the mesh bag that doubled as a purse and suitcase. "Yes. Right here."

"Damn."

"What?"

"I can't remember the kid's name. Eric?"

"Do you think he let the kitten outside?" Toni leaned across Donald, looked out his window, one breast resting on his arm. His hand slid into her lap. "I hate pussy jokes, Donald."

He laughed. "Aaron. That's the kid's name, Aaron."

Aaron scooped the leaves from the net with both hands, balancing the pole between one elbow and hip. Let them get close before he looked.

"Aaron," Donald said and held out his hand.

Aaron laid the pole at his feet, wiped his hands on his jeans and stepped awkwardly over the pole to shake Donald's hand. "Cat's in my room," he said. "I'll get him."

He kind of hoped Cory would be asleep. Be easier. But he wasn't. At first he couldn't see him. Thought maybe he really had run off. But then he saw one white paw batting the edge of the chenille spread. Aaron reached under the bed and pulled the kitten out. Cory blinked.

"Oh shit," Aaron said. He carried the kitten to the box, laid him inside, and closed the lid quickly without looking. Cory didn't make a sound.

Back outside, Evans and the girl were still standing by the pool. She had her hand on his ass. When they saw him, Evans looked embarrassed. She didn't.

"Here," Aaron said and handed Donald the box. "There's some left-over Purina in there and my aunt had one of those dumb flea collars laying around so I thought so it wouldn't go to waste I'd put it on Cory."

"Cory?" the girl said.

Shit. He could feel his face heat up. Blushing like a kid. The girl pretended not to notice. Took the box from Evans and without shaking it, tried to look inside. "Cory," she said and smiled. Great smile. How'd the old balding coot end up with such a babe? Christ. Aaron shrugged, walked back to where he'd left the pool scoop.

"Oh, here," Donald said and held out the ten dollar bill. "For your trouble. We appreciate it."

Aaron didn't watch, but he heard them walk to the room, insert the key. The girl said Cory's name in a very nice voice.

---



Too cold for shorts, Sam thought. Should have put tights on, a sweat shirt with a hood. She bent at the waist and tried to touch the asphalt between her toes, stayed that way for a bit until her head began to ache. When she stood up she saw Regina riding a bicycle.

"The damned car wouldn't start," Regina said and leaned the bike against a locust tree.

"Shouldn't we lock it?"

"We can see it from the track." She reached into the pouch pocket of her sweat shirt, pulled out a Pay Day, and peeled back the wrapper like a banana skin. "Cravings," she said. "Bite?"

Sam laughed and shook her head. They started walking at a brisk pace, but after Regina choked on a peanut, they slowed down some.

A teen-age boy in striped Nike shorts and a mesh T-shirt nodded as he lapped them. Twice? Three times? The sun slid in and out between the clouds.

---

The heat never let up in New Orleans. Before Harry woke, Sam dressed and walked downstairs to the courtyard where they served a continental breakfast. She took a glass top table near the fountain. Already it was hot. The water in the fountain had a greenish tint. After a while Harry came down. He poured a cup of coffee and kissed her on the neck.

"So," he said, "which one do you think it was?" His eyes scanned the couples who had begun to fill the courtyard.

"What?"

"You know," he said, "the moaner." He smiled. (If she touched him would he purr?) "It's often the least likely type."

"What's your frame of reference?" she asked.

"Hey," he said. "You're a real tiger, you know?" He rubbed his arm and smiled.

Sam took a drink of coffee. Cold. "Did you ever drink the coffee from your parent's mug when you were little? I used to rinse the dishes every night just so I could drink what was left of the coffee. My mother told me caffeine would stunt my growth. I was fascinated with midgets."

"You too?"

This time Sam laughed.

"Probably them," Harry said and nodded to a couple on the balcony. She, pursed-lipped and prissy. He, humped back and arthritic.

"Probably," Sam said. "Probably them."

The afternoon was so hot they spent two hours viewing the air conditioned Sun King Exhibition. The entry fee was minimal and there were pocket cassettes and ear phones. When Harry wanted to say something to Sam, he signed to her with his fingers. She couldn't make out half of it, but she smiled, which seemed to please him.

---

Toni sat naked on the bed, stroking Cory behind the ear.

"Move in with me, Donald," she said.

"I can't. Not yet."

The kitten jumped out of Toni's lap and sat at her feet, washing.

"I think," Donald said, "the kids would be confused."

Toni stood suddenly, pulled her clothes from the back of the chair and dressed hurriedly.

"Toni..." When Donald stood, his foot brushed Cory's tail. The kitten ran to his box--stomach skimming the rug, and leaped in.

"Don't frighten the kitten, Donald." Toni walked over to the box, lifted him out. "I'll take Cory with me," she said and picked up his box. She walked straight backed to the door. "Good bye, Donald."

"Toni, you don't have a car, Toni."

They both smiled, although Toni tried very hard not to.

"Shit," she said. "Oh, shit."

---

The first of December Jean called to say the Christmas trip was out. The money, she said. Jesus, the money was tight. The baby almost walking--stumbling against the furniture. Probably knock out the only two teeth she had in her head. They were used to the rains. No, maybe not that, but it was tolerable with the fireplace blazing and all the lights on so it didn't seem so dark and dreary. She would, she said, miss them all terribly at Christmas.

Next morning Sam bought a tree at a city lot without

consulting Donald or the children. A whim. She went with it. Always before they had silver spruce: tall, lean, elegant trees with stiff boughs. So she bought a Ponderosa pine. A bit lopsided and surely too tall. The smaller ornaments, the fragile glass bells and the silver balls, would be lost in the thick needled foliage.

The man at the lot helped Sam secure the tree to the car. He looped the nylon cord over the roof and ran one end through the open windows. Afterwards, Sam drove home with the heater blasting warm air against her ankles.

Because it was important that everything be different (establish new traditions?) she invited Mrs. Robinson over to trim the tree. Mrs. Robinson brought Barney who brought a box of glittery birds. "Christmas doves," he said and hung them all on one side of the tree.

"I think," Carrie said, "it's the best looking tree we've ever had." Which was something Donald always said.

---

Donald thought how much easier it had been when Sam bought all the presents. There were whole shelves of Barbies: Western Barbie, Malibu Barbie. Malibu Barbie came complete with a tan. One strap of her aqua swim suit hung seductively off her shoulder revealing a pale swatch of skin. Plastic perfection. Barbie's clothes came riveted to pink cardboard. The flat boxes hung back to front on long metal bars. The woman standing beside Donald seemed to know what she was

doing. She mumbled to herself and flipped rapidly through the display, finally deciding on a satiny set of lounging pajamas and a sequined halter top.

"Jesus," Toni said. "In my day Barbie had dark hair and a pony tail. I don't even remember about the clothes."

There were even black Barbies with modified afros.

"Look, Donald, accesories--hats, purses, shoes, scarves. Shit, it's unreal."

"I don't know. Maybe she is too old for Barbie. Maybe I should get her something educational--a book, or a Scrabble game."

"Next aisle," Toni said.

Care Bears: furry little guys in pastels with decals on their bellys. The books to go with the bears each had a moral.

"She'd be insulted, Donald."

"Yea, I guess you're right."

In the end, Donald decided on a musical jewelry box. When the lid was lifted, a tiny ballerina in a pink tu-tu flipped up and pirouetted to a tingly, fast-paced lullaby.

---

If Harry had been disappointed, he never said. A gentleman to the end. Smiling, with the space between his teeth, he sang to Sam in bed: "There is a house in New Orleans..." His singing voice was low, a mellow twang, and it surprised her. "It's called the Rising Sun..." He held her carefully, the tips of her breasts just barely touched his

chest. The warmest thing about him was his breath against her ear. "It's been the ruin of many a poor boy, and god, I know, I'm one."

Just before Sam fell asleep, Harry said her name. Except for that, they could have been anyone.

---

Donald and Toni spent the Monday before Christmas in bed. Since the weather had cooled, they had put away the blender and began drinking Irish coffees.

"Hirsute," Donald said. He held the open dictionary in his left hand and trailed his right fingers under the small print. "Covered with hair; hairy. Pertaining to or consisting of hair."

"I still say," Toni said, "that it sounds like a disease, or a pompous introduction: Ladies and gentlemen, the eminent and hirsute professor..."

Donald closed the dictionary and slid it carefully back on the shelf between An Illustrated Encyclopedia of Traditional Symbols and the collected works of Laura Ingels Wilder.

"Wait," Toni said. "I've got another one: Enervate."

"I know that," Donald said. he walked to the bed and climbed in under the covers. "It means to sap the strength or vitality from a person." He nuzzled his face against Toni's neck. "This weakness," he said, "can apply to the body or the will."

Toni lifted one arm and waved it dramatically in the air.

"The eminent and hirsute professor gave an informative and enervating lecture concerning Eniwetok, an atoll located in the Marshall Islands which functioned as a U.S. proving grounds for atomic weaponry in the late forties."

Donald propped himself up on one elbow. "Is that true? How did you know that--about Eniwetok?"

Toni frowned. "None of my fantasies surprised you. Not my most bizarre and immoral concerns. But that I should know this, this bit of..."

"Esoteric information?"

She shook her head. "Historical data," she said. "This surprises you?"

He grabbed her hand and pulled it under the covers. "I am afraid, Miss, that you have inadvertently brushed against the atomic detonator. There is no recall. The missile has been activated. 10, 9, 8..."

"And you, my hirsute professor," Toni whispered, "you said my experience with you would be strictly enervating..."

"Blast off," Donald said, and covered Toni's mouth with his own.

---

Later when Sam thought about it, she felt certain that her decision had been both instantaneous and inevitable. She had been standing at the edge of the school yard. Children everywhere. Some of the sixth graders were taller than Sam, but most of their energy and movement took place in the area below her shoulders. Looking over the tops of their heads, it

was almost impossible to separate the individuals from the constant undulation of the group. Sam didn't see Nicholas until he touched her hand.

That evening Donald came for dinner. It was all so calm and reasonable. Donald folded his napkin and laid it carefully beside his plate, even though it was only paper and would be thrown out with the steak bones and the artichoke leaves. "Very nice, Sam. Very nice."

Carrie and Nicholas, first apprehensive and finally bored, took their desserts to eat in front of the television.

"I'm going back to school, Donald. I'm pretty sure I can get a student loan or maybe even a scholarship. I don't expect you to foot the bill for that. I'm going to get my M.A., and I'm going to teach at the junior college." Sam wore a black silk skirt and a white fuzzy sweater with pearl buttons down the front, neither of which Donald had seen before.

"I got a kitten. Did I tell you I got a kitten?"

"What this means, Donald, is that you're pretty much going to have to support me for the next year." Sam stood suddenly. She picked up a plate and a glass half full of milk. "Oh, Hell," she said when the milk sloshed over onto her hand. Donald offered her his napkin, but she shook her head and walked, hand dripping, to the sink. "What kind of kitten is it?"

"What? Oh. It's white."

When she bent over to wipe up the milk, Donald stared and



stared at the delicate webbing of blue spider veins tucked up behind each knee.

"White, did you say?"

---

In a motel room across town Cory, the white kitten, was up to no good.

"God damned fly," Aaron mumbled. He reached up and flicked at the tickle on his nose. "Jesus Christ," he said and sat up in bed. "Cory?" He laughed, until feeling foolish, he made himself stop. The kitten curled up on the bed beside him and went immediately to sleep.

At breakfast when Aaron told his aunt that Cory was back, her only response was a slight hesitation when she flipped the egg.

"I wasn't going to keep him," Aaron said. Although until he said it, nothing had been decided. "I know he's not mine."

She slid the fried egg off the teflon spatula onto his plate. He ripped off a piece of toast and stabbed at the yolk until it broke and oozed out across the plate. "He's a smart little guy, you think? Him finding the open window and all, and working at the edge of the screen."

His aunt retied the belt on her robe and poured another cup of coffee. The smile she gave him was the one she used for registaring quests.

"Right after breakfast I'll take him back," he said.

She nodded.

---

Blunt tipped scissors made it difficult. The paper bunched and wrinkled where he forced the scissors through to start the holes. One eye ended up slightly larger than the other, but they were properly positioned and that was some bit of luck. He secured the mask to the sides of his head with scotch tape. Not much of the tape got in his hair. The white construction paper beard (which he had cut into narrow strips and painstakingly rolled each end around a pencil until it curled) billowed wonderfully as he walked into Carrie's room and into Barbie's bath.

"You zipper head! You jerk! You baby cakes!" Carrie grabbed an ankle and wrestled him to the floor. She was on top of him, pounding and pounding, when Sam pulled them apart.

"What the hell is going on here?"

"He thinks he's such a hot shot!" Carrie said and pointed to the tub, to the water on the rug.

Nicholas, behind the Santa mask, said nothing. Only the edge of his beard fluttered against his chest.

When they had settled down enough to talk ("Pick the bath tub up, Carrie." "Take the mask off, Nicholas."), they sat at the kitchen table and drank lemon tea. Christmas Eve. In the morning Donald would come and they would open presents and it would be the same as always, wouldn't it?

Later, Harry called.

All the way from Texas, he said, but did not yell into the phone. He called Sam his "little woman." The expression--which presumed a history they did not share--was a joke between them and made Sam laugh. "The cats," he said, "are

wearing red and green bows for the holiday." There had been lots of parties, more to come. But now, he said, "I was thinking of you."

"I'm glad." She remembered the space between his teeth and the little noise he made--the quick intake of breath--as though everytime were a surprise.

"Yea, well. The first Christmas can be tough." When she didn't answer, he began a song: "A happy dog is a frisky dog..."

The children slept peacefully (visions of sugar plums?).

Christmas day was loud. Nicholas lifted each box over his head and shook the contents vigorously. Nobody said anything about breakables.

---

In January, Sam enrolled. Her first class was a seminar: A Formalistic Approach to Literature. Dr. Adams, a tall large boned man with vague half-formed gestures, puffed continuously on a long stemmed pipe. Embers floated around his head like flakes of red confetti and settled near the collar of his shirt where they singed holes the size of bee-bees.

Near the end of April, Sam walked out of the south exit of Barrister Hall and noticed for the first time the blossoms on the trees above Regina's head.

"It's spring," Regina said. "It's spring and you almost forgot."

Sam laughed. "I didn't!"

At first glance, Regina's sweater seemed a splotchy blend of wools, but on closer inspection, it proved to be a cleverly

worked sequence of interfaced rabbits--white to black body--like an M. C. Escher print. Sam blinked and lifted her eyes to Regina's face.

"Ah, yes," Regina laughed. "Once the pattern is recognized, it is seen with mesmerizing clarity."

"You look great," Sam said.

"Great with child," Regina said and turned sideways. "So how was class? How was the human torch?"

"One tiny hole," Sam said, and pointed to an area near her left breast. "Hardly noticeable."

"Jeez! She thinks this is normal," Regina said, lifting her arms and rolling her eyes towards the sky. "Look around you, Sammy. We are talking academics in hush puppies and polyesters. This is not the real world."

Sam laughed and threw an arm over Regina's shoulder. "Jesus, it's good to see you."

"You're okay then?"

"A-okay. Come on. My shoes are in the car."

At the track, Regina walked a slow, ponderous waddle. "Can you see my shoe laces? I can't see over this," she said and cupped her belly with both hands. Lime green laces with fuschia teddy bears smiling paw to paw. "Jesus. I feel like a tick."

"Hang in there. Just a few more weeks."

Regina released her stomach and ran her fingers through her hair. "I'm still waiting for that old maternal glow." She stopped and turned to face Sam with her hands on her hips. "Hey, that's not another one of those myths it it--like acne

goes away after puberty and menstruation makes you a woman?"

Sam laughed. "I promise you, you'll glow."

Tiny shuffle steps.

"Jesus, Sammy. This must be what purgatory is like. Forever eight months pregnant." She put her hand against her spine and sighed. "Just a little cramping," she said. "I'm fine."

"You're sure?"

"Sure, I'm sure. Let's try walking a little faster; Sometimes that takes care of it." Regina lifted first one leg and then the other in a slow, careful exaggeration--like a moon walk. "It isn't working," she said and spread her hands across her stomach. "Take it easy in there, kid. This is your mother speaking."

"Regina, has it occurred to you that you might be in labor?"

"Don't be ridiculous! I've got two appointments this afternoon."

Sam laughed. "So tell it to the kid."

Regina grimaced and bent over.

"I think this is it," Sam said.

"Hey, isn't that my line?"

"Come one, I'm taking you to the hospital."

Regina nodded.

"I'll drop you off then come back as soon as Donald picks up the kids. Wait for me," she said and with one finger touched Regina's stomach.

"Sammy? Is it too late to back out?"

---

Thirty-five minutes later, Sam knocked on Mrs. Robinson's door. Mrs. Robinson was in no hurry. She smiled and offered a plastic Christmas tray full of cookies. "Go on, kids, have some of these." The cookies came in crescents, stars, something that looked like a flame, and were covered with a thin drizzle of pink icing. Carrie and Nicholas each took one.

"What's that? What's that?" A bulky old woman in a gold flecked mu-mu hoisted herself out of the lazy boy and walked to where Sam stood. "What's that you're saying?"

"Myrtle, this is my neighbor and her kids. Sam's friend's going to have a baby."

"Huph!" Myrtle said. Her Navy blue tennis shoes snagged against the shag carpet. "She sure don't look pregnant." She waddled back to her chair and plunked down with a groan.

Mrs. Robinson turned back to Sam. "I wish I could help you out. You know I always love watching the kids. But I've got the group here..."

"What's that?" from the lazy-boy.

There were five or six other people in the room. Old women smelling of moth balls and Jean Nate, and of course, Barney. Barney leaned forward and tongued his upper plate in and out.

"Hey!" Nicholas said. "Hey!"

Barney laughed and wiped the spittle with the back of

his hand.

A tiny woman with pale translucent skin and blue hair reached out and jostled Barney's arm. "Shame on you! Scaring the boy like that!"

"Oh, Nicky ain't scared, are you boy."

"What? What's that," from the lazy-boy.

There were candles on the ebony coffee table--green and red with bunches of holly snaked around the base. More cookies on a silver tray shaped like a heart.

"It's not Christmas," Nicholas said. "It's not Christmas and it's not Valentine either." He pointed first to one tray and then another. He licked his fingers and took another cookie.

"See there," Barney said. "Smart too,"

"Thanks for the cookies," Sam said. "I guess I'll run the kids over to Donald's and hope we don't pass on the way."

"Oh, birthings are an exciting time," Mrs. Robinson said.

"What? What's that?"

"I said, Myrtle, that birthings are an exciting time."

Myrtle squinted in Sam's direction. "Must going to be a mighty little baby."

Mrs. Robinson hugged each of the children, then put her arms around Sam. "Don't mind Myrtle, she's a little deaf, but she's a Rosicrucian."

---

"Listen, sweetie," Toni said. She was holding Cory to her face and for a second Donald thought it was the kitten she

was addressing. "It's been long enough. I think it's time you made the big move." She kissed Cory on the whiskers and slipped his head under her chin. "The only thing is, I sort of hate giving up the pool."

They were sitting on yellow webbed patio chairs Aaron had just that week dragged out of the shed and lined up against the oleander hedge.

"But Toni, we've never used the pool." Donald reached out and touched Cory behind one ear.

"Well then it's time, don't you think?"

"Toni, in an hour I've got to pick up the children. Anyway, I have no idea where my suit is."

"Suit?" Toni lifted Cory to her face. "The man wears a suit?"

---

Nicholas hadn't wanted to leave Mrs. Robinson, Barney, or the cookies; and now he was impatient to get to Donald's. He leaned over the front seat and batted the brown paper bag stuffed with newspaper against Sam's arm. "Did you see the owl I made at school, Mommy?"

"Not now, Nicholas. Are you in your seat belt?"

Carrie took the owl from Nicholas and pretended to untie the cord that bound the end.

"I'm telling!" Nicholas grabbed at the owl. Carrie held it just out of reach and wove it back and forth through the air.

"I'm flying. I'm flying to Daddy's house."



Sam looked nervously at her watch. "God damned traffic," she said.

---

"The best thing to do is go cold turkey," Toni said. "Just drop the towel and dive." She laughed and maneuvered herself to the side of the pool and playfully splashed water at Donald's feet.

The motel-white towel, a too small wedge of terry cloth, felt rough against his skin.

"Come on, you know you want to." Toni cocked her head flirtaciously.

Reluctantly Donald dropped his towel and dove into the pool.

---

In a stridently cheerful labor room at St. Joseph's, Regina lifted her hand and touched her lips. "Could I have a little water, please?"

The nurse hesitated. "Could make you sick to your stomach."

"I'm so thirsty."

"A little ice, maybe."

The labor room was carefully camouflaged by flowered wallpaper and white shuttered windows. The bed was covered with a matching spread. There were plastic geraniums in a vase.

"Here, honey," the nurse said and slid a sliver of ice

between her lips.

Regina, breathing the soft, shallow puffs of labor, reached for a corner of the hospital gown (floral) and covered herself.

"Oh, honey, don't worry about that." The nurse laughed. "We've got more important things to consider." She eased Regina onto her back. "Come on, Mama. Let's see how you're dialating."

Regina panted to the crest of a contraction, then slowly exhaled.

"Well, you sure are in transition now..."

---

Aaron lay on his bed and listened to the woman--Evan's woman--laughing and splashing in the pool. He imagined how she would look in a bikini. When he heard the tentative scraping, he tried to ignore it.

"Meow"

"Shit!" He opened the window and lifted Cory through the ripped screen. "Damn you little sucker." He cupped the kitten with one hand against his chest and shut the window. "What are we going to do?" he asked and put Cory on the bed. There was a loud squeal from the pool. Aaron frowned and squinted through the window. "Well, shit. Evan's had his chance." Aaron looked back at the kitten. He could see by the rhythm of his breathing that Cory was purring. "They don't have time for you, you know? So for now on, you belong to me. I got time. I got lots of time."

The kitten purred. His eyes were little slits of blue. "We'll stay with my friend John for a few days, okay?" Aaron threw jeans and a t-shirt into his back pack while he talked. "John's got a Siamese cat, but he won't give you any grief. Don't worry."

He mashed the clothing into a nest and set Cory in the center. "In a couple days that Evan's guy will forget all about you. Then we can come back, okay? You belong to me now."

Aaron left a note for his aunt. He didn't say anything about Cory. That way, if Evans and the girl came looking for their kitten, she wouldn't have to lie.

---

Sam lifted the children's suitcase from the trunk of the car.

"Maybe Daddy moved," Nicholas said.

"You jerk," Carrie said and brought the paper bag owl down against his head. "He wouldn't move without telling us. You're so stupid."

Nicholas socked her once in the stomach, then ran to where the oleanders grew around the pool.

"Kindergarten baby, born in the navy!"

"Come on you two," Sam said. "I haven't got time for this."

Carrie raised the owl over her head and threw it at Nicholas. It glanced his arm and bounced into the hedge. Nicholas, down on his knees, climbed in between the bushes.

"Daddy?" he said, one hand firmly grasping the owl. "Hi, Daddy. Can I go swimming too?"

Donald swam to the side of the pool and climbed awkwardly out of the water. He stood, dripping, with the too small towel clutched against his chest. Toni treaded water carefully, without a sound. She hunched her shoulders and turned away when Sam opened the metal gate and set the suitcase down at the edge of the pool. She was flanked on either side by a child.

"Jesus, Samantha," Donald said. "I'm sorry. I never would have...I mean..."

Carrie looked apprehensively from one adult to the other.

"I didn't mean to throw it up in your face..."

"Donald, I didn't leave you because you had an affair. I left you because you had an affair and I didn't care."

Nicholas threw the owl into the air. It landed in the water and floated very slowly on a ripple of water towards Toni. She lifted the soaked bird up by the tail and laid it dripping on the tile.

---

When Sam braked and swerved so suddenly that her right front wheel jumped the curb and rammed the fire hydrant, it was not because she had been distracted by the rear view mirror (although later she saw the almost endless metaphorical possibilities of that); nor was it because she'd heard the children. And she certainly hadn't seen the cat until after the ambulance arrived and the fat woman pointed up into the

tree where a calico dressed in a pink bonnet, clung flattened against a spindly upper limb. What it was, was luck. Pure and simple luck.

She'd been driving effortlessly through the new subdivision with the bulldozed berms and the two story Tudors. A short cut back to Regina. "True wit is nature to advantaged dress't. What oft was thought but ne'er so well express't," she said aloud. "Alexander Pope." She'd laughed because she'd liked knowing that and because it was so appropriate, and because later when she told Regina, Regina would roll her eyes and say, "You mean that tacky tract off Lowell Drive? Yea, I know the one. It sucks." Even when her Thesaurus slid off the seat and landed on top of the soggy paper owl (Nicholas had insisted) it hadn't bothered her. "Hang in there, Regina," she said. "I'm making good time."

The mirror, tilted at an angle, had reflected just the very tips of trees and mostly sky. She'd been driving effortlessly. Like flying a kite. Like riding a roller coaster. Up. Up. Holding tight. Over...Just blue sky and the tips of trees. The review mirror, the kids called it. "I want to sit in the middle so I can watch out of the review mirror."

Then the car was on the curb and Yoda was standing just outside her window getting soaked by a spray of hydrant water; a god damned geyser!

Yoda leaned forward and tugged on the pointed tip of each ear. When he raised up Sam saw that he was, after all, a little boy with green eyes and freckles, holding in his hands a rubber Halloween mask--fifty bucks at Pardinis.

"Lady? Are you all right, Lady?"

Sam laid her head against the steering wheel. Everything glittered--little pinholes of light, bright funnels through space. Jesus, she was tired, and it was so hot. Texas choker days: It's too damned hot to fuck...do you like this...we don't really know each other that well...There is a house in New Orleans....

"Lady!"

A woman came out of a red tudor. She used her arms like a sling to cradle her huge belly. "Peter?" she said to the little boy, and touched his head and his shoulder. Satisfied, she stuck her head through the open window and examined Sam. "It's not bad, believe me. I've seen plenty of nose bleeds, and they always look worse than they really are." She removed her head from the car and turned to Peter. "See, the lady was-wearing-her-seat-belt, and that's why it's nothing but a nose bleed." She shook her head vigorously up and down and seemed oblivious to the hydrant spray that had soaked through her jeans and t-shirt.

"It wasn't my fault, honest Ma. Jamie was dressing her dumb cat up in doll clothes and it got mad and ran right out into the street and Jamie went after it and this lady almost creamed them both."

"If she hadn't been wearing a seat belt," the fat woman said, "she could have really been hurt."

"Excuse me," Sam said. She could taste the blood now. "I need to get to St. Joe's."

"Just a nose bleed is all," the woman said. "But I

called the ambulance soon as I heard the crash. You just put your head back now." She tilted her own to demonstrate to Sam, and that's when she saw the cat. "Oh, lord," she said and pointed, "does that cat look a sight in a bonnet?"

---

"I know, I know, honey. It's not as much fun getting it out as it was getting it in." The nurse touched Regina gently on the forehead. She lifted her bangs and petted them away from her face. "You're going to do all right, though. Sure you're a fighter, I can see that."

Regina thought, were it not for the effort it would take, she would ask for medication, any medication. Screw Dr. Lamaze. He was a man, wasn't he? So what the hell did he know? And it hadn't even really started yet, had it? She remembered a conversation overheard at a supermarket check-out stand:

"The head? That ain't nothin'! It's the shoulders that do you in. Jesus, the shoulders!" The woman had held her hands a great distance apart, as though gauging the length of a trout. "Jesus! The shoulders!"

In between contractions Regina maneuvered--in a sort of spastic slide--to the edge of the bed and onto a gurney they would use to wheel her into delivery.

"Atta girl, now," the nurse said. "Atta girl."

You were supposed to relax in between contractions. That was the big thing. Give into pain and pain consumed you. Don't call it pain. Call it a necessary spasm of the uterine

muscle. Calm. Calmly. Breathe in slowly.

Oh, god, not again. Not so soon. Blow. Blow. Let the rhythm of your breathing carry you. Hollow, windy, like air forced through a tunnel.

"Ready, honey?" the nurse said. The double doors swung open and the gurney slid through soundlessly.

---

Before Sam lay down, the ambulance driver made his announcement: "I'm no paramedic," he said. "You want the paramedics, you got to dial the fire department."

"You hear that?" the fat woman said and turned to Peter who tugged the Yoda mask back down over his head. "The-fire-department."

The ambulance driver handed Sam a box of cotton balls. "My mother used to pack mine," he said and pointed to Sam's nose. "Want me to use the siren? It'll cost you extra."

Sam nodded, began packing cotton up her nose. The siren started almost before the motor caught. Peter's mother (she had moved out of the hydrant's spray), and Peter (he hadn't), waved as the ambulance pulled away. The calico in the tree arched its back and probably, although it was difficult to know because of the bonnet, flattened his ears against the noise.

At the hospital, Sam had the driver pull right up to the main entrance.

"I'm supposed to use the Emergency," he said.

Sam held out a five dollar bill, some ones.



"Nah," he said and waved his hand. "They bill ya. They bill your insurance."

"It's a tip," Sam said. But because of the cotton up her nose it may not have been entirely clear to the driver. She folded the money and stuffed it into his pocket. He got out first and offered Sam his hand.

"Remember," he called after her. "You want the paramedics, call the fire department."

Sam shared the elevator with two old women who spoke Spanish, or maybe Portuguese. One had a mustache and carried what looked like a bowling ball bag. She flared her nostrils and gestured rather conspicuously in Sam's direction.

"Nose bleed," Sam said and smiled. She thought of removing the packing, but could taste a metallic drip in the back of her throat and decided against it. "It's nothing, really." Both women turned in unison and watched the floor numbers flash over the door.

"A happy dog is a frisky dog..." It was hard going singing, with cotton up your nose; but nice, a kind of muted vibratto. The two women got off hurridly and so missed the final verse.

---

The pain. Jesus. Nobody tells you, Regina thought. If she closed her eyes, the brief period between contractions seemed hardly to exist. So she kept them open. Staring. Everytime she blinked, she had to will her lids to open again. Watching. Sucked in. Funneled through into a threshold of

pain and aching awareness. No choices. Nothing to conquer. Endurance.

A nurse strapped her arms down. What did they think she would do? Someone lifted her legs into stirrups: green sheet tented up over her stomach. A mirror, hung at an angle from the ceiling, reflected a peculiar disjointed view of her bottom half. She was separating. Her arms and legs were floated free, her fingers and toes tingled.

"You're hyperventillating," the nurse said. "Take a deep breath. That's right. Deeper. Deeper."

"Deeper? That's what she said."

Sam. Sam in a hospital gown and floral cap with great wads of something stuffed up her nose.

"Sammy?" Regina pointed to her own nose.

"It's nothing. A nose bleed. Hey, everything's all right." A slow smile that flattened Sam's nose and focused Regina's energy. "So," Sam said, leaning forward and whispering into Regina's ear. "The home stretch, kiddo."

Then everything began to happen at once. The doctor padded in on cushioned soles. The grand entrance.

"Whenever you're ready," he said. Bored. Distracted. Perhaps late for a tennis match? "Whenever you're ready."

"Asshole," Sam said, just loud enough for Regina to hear. She rested her hands on Regina's shoulders and lifted her own eyes to the mirror. It isn't true that you forget the pain, she thought, only that ultimately, it doesn't matter. Just something else that can't be measured. "Don't waste any of it," Sam said. "Ride it. Skim the top." A quick intake of

breath, a tightening of intent.

UP...UP...

Regina rose onto her elbows. Sam propped her back, felt the muscles, knew the effort. "Open your eyes, Regina. Open your eyes and look in the mirror." Look, Sam thought. Even if it's just a flash between the pain, look!

Head first, then the shoulders.

Holding tight...

Shoulders hardly wider than the head. "One more, Regina. Just one more."

Regina's moan slid over the top into A Cry.

Blue skies and the tips of trees. Then the light, careless floating free.

"It's a girl," Sam said. Only maybe it sounded different because of the cotton and the tears. "It's a girl. It's a girl. It's a girl. It's a girl. It's a girl."